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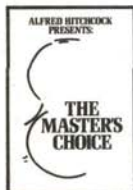
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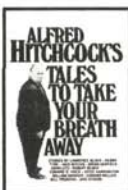
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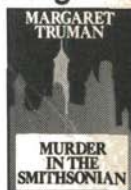
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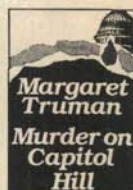
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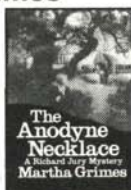
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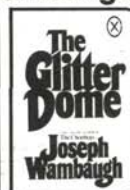
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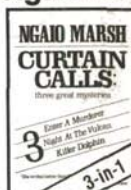
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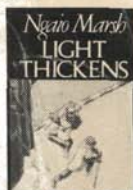
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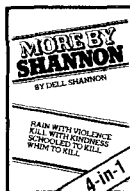
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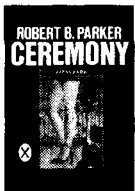
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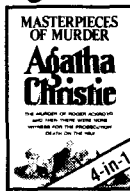
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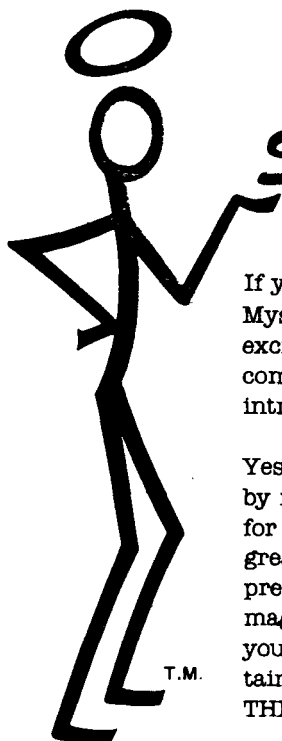
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**Note: indicia on page 161**

a **NEW Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by**

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*"Maybe there isn't any case, Doc," Sheriff Lens said. "Every unexplained death isn't murder. You want things too neat. You'd like a solution that ties up Matt Xavier's funeral and the Duprey death and Teddy's attack on that girl all in one big bundle. But life's not like that . . ."*

## **THE PROBLEM OF THE GRAVEYARD PICNIC**

*by* **EDWARD D. HOCH**

**"T**his time I promised you a graveyard story," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he poured a little brandy all around. "But one without ghosts or thunder or dark of night. It all took place in the daylight—but that didn't make it any less mysterious . . ."

The spring of 1932 was a depressing time for everyone (Dr. Sam continued), with people out of work and businesses failing. There was some wild talk of revolution as the presidential election neared. Northmont was little better off than the rest of the country, but we were cutting back in just about every way we could, and even I was affected.

After ten years at our little office near the center of town, my nurse April and I were packing up to move. Northmont's Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, an eighty-bed facility opened with much fanfare in 1929, had proven far too large for the town's needs. As a result, one whole wing—some thirty beds—was being converted to professional offices. The hospital's governing board had offered me attractive rent for the first year, and with patients behind in their

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bills and my own debts beginning to rise, I was in no position to refuse.

April was excited because the new office nearly doubled our floor space, but I was dubious. "We'll be two miles from town. What about the patients who can't drive out to see us or are too elderly for a horse and buggy?"

"Most of them had to make the trip into town anyway, or else you had to go see them. And it'll be a lot easier for you to make your hospital calls."

"I suppose you're right," I agreed reluctantly.

On the warm April morning we moved in, Dr. Fenshaw, one of the hospital administrators, was there to greet us. "Newly painted, Sam, just as you wanted." He was a short man with a squeaky voice and a nervous manner better suited to hospital boardrooms than to bedside care.

"Thanks, Dave. It looks fine. The van with my office furniture should be right along."

"Nice view out the window," he commented.

I couldn't resist a bit of sarcasm at that. "Nice if you like cemeteries. Some of my patients may not like the reminder."

"Spring Glen is more like a park than a cemetery," Fenshaw argued, and I had to admit he was right. The place even attracted occasional picnickers. From my window I saw only one small group of headstones along the trees and winding paths. The glen that gave the place its name had a small spring-fed creek running along the rocky edge. This time of year, when there was still melting snow on Cobble Mountain to the north, the creek was wider and deeper than usual. It rushed through Spring Glen like a miniature river.

We spent the rest of the day moving furniture and getting settled. April worked a few extra hours so we'd be ready for patients in the morning. Sheriff Lens even came by to see us in our new quarters, bringing a basket of flowers from his wife. "The town's really gettin' spruced up for this summer's centennial," he told us.

"We celebrated our three hundredth anniversary five years ago, Sheriff. How can they have a centennial this year?"

"That other was the pilgrim thing. This is the official founding of Northmont."

"I'll think about it when it gets closer."

He gave one of his typical grunts. "You goin' to Matt Xavier's funeral in the mornin'?"

"I can't get away on my first day here, but if things are slow I'll

walk over to the cemetery around noon." Xavier was one of Fenshaw's patients, a 92-year-old man who'd finally released his stranglehold on life.

Things were slow in the morning, with more inquiries about our new location than actual patient calls. A little before noon I saw the funeral procession turn into the cemetery and decided to walk over. Matt Xavier had been an important citizen and I had no wish to boycott his funeral just because he chose a different doctor to minister to his ills.

The graveside service was brief, and as it ended the gravediggers—two brothers named Cedric and Teddy Bush—moved in with their shovels. Teddy Bush, the younger of the two and somewhat slow, saw me and waved. I waved back and strolled down a path to investigate my new surroundings.

Ahead of me, just off the road under some budding willow trees, was a black Model-T Ford. I could see a couple picnicking on the grass about fifty feet away. It was a pleasant spot, as yet unused for burials, and I couldn't blame them for taking advantage of the place. I could see they were young, about my age, and they were just finishing their sandwiches. But as I started toward them, the young woman suddenly rose with her back to me. She had black shoulder-length hair and was dressed in navy-blue slacks and a blue polka-dot blouse. Almost at once she started running away from me toward the path.

The young man seemed agitated. He jumped to his feet and called after her, "Rose! Come back!"

But she kept running, and something made me run after her. The path led to a stone footbridge about ten feet above the swollen creek. As she reached the center of it, she seemed to trip and toppled over the stone railing into the water. Her sudden terrified scream was cut short by her gasping impact with the rushing creek. I watched helpless as she was swept downstream by the savage current, vanishing from sight before I ever thought of diving in after her.

"What happened here?" Sheriff Lens asked, lumbering along the path twenty minutes later in answer to my urgent summons. I'd sent the young woman's distraught husband to telephone him while I worked my way downstream in an effort to locate her.

"Woman fell off the bridge," I called back to him.

"Is she a good swimmer? She might be taking a swim."

"Rose can't swim at all," her husband said, hurrying along behind the sheriff.

"I'll drive farther along in my car," the sheriff said grimly. "I know a place we might find her. There's a dead tree across the creek down there."

"Come on," I told the husband. "Let's go with him."

"All right."

"I'm a doctor," I told the curly-haired young man as we hurried to the sheriff's car. "Sam Hawthorne."

"Bob Duprey, from Shinn Corners." It was a town about twenty miles away. "My God, if Rose is dead I want to die, too! We've only been married for three years—"

"We'll find her," Sheriff Lens promised as he started the car, not bothering to speculate on her probable condition.

We passed the grave of the recently deceased Matt Xavier, and I noticed only one of the Bush brothers was there digging. Teddy had gone off somewhere, maybe for coffee. The sheriff negotiated the rutted road with skill. Bob Duprey was silent until we reached the fallen tree at the edge of the graveyard.

"There she is!" he shouted. "I see her!"

I saw her, too—the black hair and polka-dot blouse caught among the tree's dead limbs. Duprey cried out as I left the car and ran forward. I was the first one into the chilly water, clinging to the dead tree as I worked my way toward the body. The other two were right behind me and somehow we managed to rip the blouse free of the tree and get her to the grassy bank of the swollen creek.

I worked over her for twenty minutes, trying to pump the water from her lungs and replace it with air, but I knew it was too late. Finally, as Sheriff Lens stood silently by and her husband sat against a tree, sobbing, I pronounced the terrible words. "It's no use. She's gone."

"If she'd made it past the tree she might have been O.K.," the sheriff said to me. "The creek flows into Duck Pond and loses its force."

Behind us, Bob Duprey was repeating her name softly to himself.

"Can you tell us what happened?" I asked him. For a long time he simply stared at her, wiping the tears from his face.

Finally, when Sheriff Lens repeated the question, he replied, "I don't know. She wanted to come on a picnic. I lost my job last month

and she thought it might cheer me up. We drove over from Shinn Corners and got here about eleven, I guess."

"Which of you suggested having the picnic here in the cemetery?" I asked, while the sheriff got a blanket from the car to cover the body.

"Rose did. Some friend told us how nice it is. God—"

"You can't blame yourself," Sheriff Lens said.

"We were talking and eating when suddenly she stood up. Something seemed to have alarmed her and she started running away down the trail. The only person in sight was Dr. Hawthorne here. All I could think at the time was that she took him to be a cemetery employee come to chase us away—but that doesn't explain her running like that."

The sheriff turned to me. "What did you see, Doc?"

I described it as accurately as I could. "She just seemed to trip and fall over the side. But there was nothing to trip on. The path up there is smooth. I ran onto the bridge myself and if there was a wire or something like that I'd have seen or felt it."

"Did your wife ever have dizzy spells, Mr. Duprey?"

"Nothing like that, Sheriff. She's never even fainted so far as I know."

"How about enemies?" I asked. "A jealous suitor?"

"Of course not! Why are you asking that? No one caused her death!"

Sheriff Lens beckoned me aside. "He's right, Doc. It's an accident. You can't make anything else out of it."

"The whole thing is very strange," I insisted.

"Look, it's bad enough I have to put up with that nutty nephew of Xavier's who keeps saying his uncle was murdered!"

"All right," I said, not wanting to hear about Xavier's death just then. I looked down at Mrs. Duprey's blanket-covered body, knowing I'd witnessed either a tragic accident or an impossible murder, but for the life of me not knowing which of the two it was.

Sheriff Lens came to see me at my new office the following morning. "Did you get the autopsy report on Rose Duprey yet?" he asked.

I nodded. "I asked for a copy just now. There's nothing at all unusual. Death by drowning. No other injuries except one or two bruises from the fall and being swept downstream."

"Could she have been drugged somehow?"

"Now you're sounding like me, Sheriff. No, her stomach was empty

and there was no evidence of drugs or alcohol in her bloodstream. She was a perfectly normal young woman. —In fact, the autopsy shows she was about two months pregnant."

"Pregnant!"

"It does happen to married couples, Sheriff."

"Yeah," he admitted. "Did her husband know about it?"

"You'll have to ask him. Does she have any other family?"

"Parents and a brother. They're pretty broken up."

Something else occurred to me. "You said Xavier's nephew thinks he was murdered."

Sheriff Lens nodded. "The nephew is Scott Xavier. You know him, don't you?"

"I think I met him once at a Grange meeting."

"Well, Scott says his uncle was murdered and Doc Fenshaw is covering it up."

"What does Fenshaw say?"

"That Xavier died of old age and Scott is off his rocker."

"What do you think, Sheriff?"

"Scott's off his rocker, all right. Everyone knows that."

"Maybe I'll go see him."

"You really want to find a murder, don't you, Doc?"

"Only if there's one to be found," I assured him.

Scott Xavier was a grey-haired man in his early fifties who'd farmed some land outside of town until he lost it at the beginning of the Depression. That had seemed to unbalance him somewhat, making him see plots where none existed. When I found him later that morning he was down at the courthouse, arguing to have his uncle's just-buried body exhumed.

I rested a reassuring hand gently on his shoulder. "Remember me, Scott? Dr. Sam Hawthorne?"

He appraised me. "Yeah, I remember. You're a friend of Fenshaw's."

"He's a fellow doctor, that's all. What's the trouble?"

"Uncle Matt was murdered. Fenshaw poisoned him."

"Do you have any evidence of that?"

"Of course not—he destroyed the evidence! That's why I want them to look again!"

"You can't make baseless charges like that, Scott."

"I know what I know!"

"I saw you at the funeral yesterday. A young woman drowned in the cemetery creek about that same time."

"I heard."

"Know anything about it?"

"What would I know?"

Talking to him was getting me nowhere. "Forget about your uncle," I advised. "He died a natural death."

"Like the woman who drowned?" he asked slyly.

As I was leaving the courthouse I spied the older of the Bush brothers lounging against the cemetery's pickup truck, apparently waiting for some bags of fertilizer to be loaded inside.

"Hello, Cedric," I greeted him. "How are you today?"

"Can't complain, Dr. Sam."

"Where's Teddy?"

"Over at the lunch counter gettin' his morning shot in a cup of coffee. You think Roosevelt will really come out for Repeal if he gets nominated?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if both candidates support it." Cedric was halfway intelligent, unlike Teddy who never read anything more uplifting than the barber-shop copy of the *Police Gazette*. "Did you finish with Xavier's grave yesterday?"

"That's what we're paid for."

"I passed by around noon and Teddy wasn't there."

"He went off in the bushes to relieve himself." He laughed. "He was gone so long I thought he was lost."

"He's a hard worker, though."

"Some of the time."

"You heard about the young woman who drowned in the park?"

"Everybody heard about it. Someone from Shinn Corners, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "You and Teddy didn't see it happen?"

"I didn't."

I left him standing against the truck and headed down the block toward the lunch counter. For some reason I was growing more certain that Rose Duprey had been murdered. Some fact, still buried in my subconscious, was guiding me in that direction. But how, and why?

Teddy Bush wasn't at the lunch counter, though I was told he

hadn't been gone long. I was about to drive back to my office when I saw Sheriff Lens hurrying toward me. "I need you, Doc!"

"What's up?"

"Teddy Bush just tried to hurt a girl. I had to arrest him."

The girl was frightened but unharmed except for several black-and-blue marks. She was a pretty young redhead in her early twenties named Susan Gregger, from Cabin Road on the way to Shinn Corners. She'd driven the family Hudson into town alone to do some shopping, and as she'd walked across the parking lot behind the lunch counter Teddy Bush had approached her.

"I could smell liquor on his breath," she told me as I completed my examination in a private room off the sheriff's office. "He said something I couldn't understand and then grabbed my skirt. I screamed and—"

"You can dress now," I told her. "You're a lucky young lady."

Back in the sheriff's office, he filled me in. "I heard her scream and came runnin'. By that time Teddy had her on the ground. I had to pull him off and handcuff him."

"I can't believe it of Teddy," I said. "Let me talk to him."

We went upstairs to the cellblock. Teddy was on a cot with his eyes closed. He looked up and said, "Hello, Doc."

"What happened, Teddy? What were you trying to do?"

"Nothin', Doc. It was the drink I had—it went to my head."

"So you went outside and grabbed the first woman you saw? That's not like you, Teddy."

"I don't know, Doc. I don't want to talk about it."

"Teddy—"

"I was drunk, that's all!"

I sighed and left him. "What'll happen to him?" I asked the sheriff as we went back downstairs.

"He didn't hurt her much. It'll depend on whether she wants to press charges against him."

I suddenly remembered Cedric, waiting for his brother back at the truck and told Sheriff Lens I'd better go get him.

When I found Cedric, he listened quietly to what I told him. "That damn fool," he grumbled when I'd finished.

"Come on, Cedric," I said. "I'll take you over to the jail to see him."

Around noon, alone with Sheriff Lens, I was feeling depressed. "I'm frustrated, Sheriff. I can't get a grip on this case."

"Maybe there isn't any case, Doc. Every unexplained death isn't murder. You want things too neat. You'd like a solution that ties up Matt Xavier's funeral and the Duprey death and Teddy's attack on that girl all in one big bundle. But life's not like that."

"Maybe not," I admitted.

"Look, I've got the husband, Bob Duprey, coming in at one. Want to stay and talk with him?"

"What's he coming for?"

"Funeral arrangements. They want to bury her at Spring Glen tomorrow morning and I have to release the body. No reason why I shouldn't."

"No reason," I agreed.

When Duprey arrived, he was pale and nervous, still not fully accepting the tragic event. "I'm surprised you want to bury her here," Sheriff Lens said as he signed the release papers for the undertaker.

"She always liked Spring Glen."

"Mr. Duprey, did you know your wife was pregnant?" I asked.

He nodded. "She just found out from Dr. Fenshaw last week."

"And she was happy about the baby? No cause for depression?"

"None at all. We were both looking forward to it."

I took a deep breath. "Did you ever hear of a man named Teddy Bush?"

"No."

"Might your wife have known him?"

"I doubt it. What are you getting at?"

"She seemed to be running away when the accident happened. Bush is a gravedigger at the cemetery. I wonder if she might have been running from him."

"You were the only one in sight."

"I know, but she never really looked at me."

After he'd gone, Sheriff Lens said, "Do you think he might have killed her somehow?"

"The husband is always a prime suspect, but he was in my sight all the time. He didn't throw anything, or pull any wires. If she was killed, it had to be someone else."

"Maybe whoever it was used a fishin' tackle to cast a line at her and yank her off the side of the bridge."

"I'd have seen it. We were in bright sunlight. And she wasn't yanked over. She simply toppled over."

"There were no drugs in her system—you said so yourself. Hell, let go of this one, Doc. It was an accident. Maybe she got dizzy and fell because she was pregnant. You're startin' to sound like Scott Xavier, tryin' to see a murder where there isn't one."

"I suppose you're right," I admitted. "I guess I'd better get back to the office."

"By the way, that girl decided not to press charges against Teddy. I'll let him sweat a few more hours and then turn him loose."

"Well, that's good news, anyway. I just wish we knew what made him do it."

"And if he's likely to do it again."

Back at the office, I found Dave Fenshaw waiting for me. I was beginning to realize the drawbacks of my location in a wing of the hospital.

"I need a word with you," he said, perching on a corner of my desk.

"What about?" I asked, glancing through a few messages April had left on the blotter.

"I hear you were down at the courthouse this morning talking to Scott Xavier. The man's really crazy, you know."

"Is that your medical diagnosis?"

"Look, Sam—Xavier was an old man. He died a natural death."

"You protest too much, Dave. But I believe you."

That seemed to satisfy him. "I just don't want trouble with Scott Xavier."

After he had gone, I started playing with theories. Dave Fenshaw had killed Xavier and Rose Duprey had found out somehow—she was a patient of Fenshaw. She'd suggested the graveyard picnic so she could observe Xavier's funeral, and when Fenshaw saw her there he'd killed her, too. Or maybe he had another reason for killing her.

But how? By magic? Hypnotism? Could a person who didn't swim be hypnotized and made to jump off a bridge into a creek?

I gave up and made myself concentrate on April's messages. There were patients to see.

It was late afternoon, almost five o'clock, when April told me Teddy Bush was waiting outside to see me. I finished with my last patient and asked him to come in. He was obviously embarrassed and entered the office with his head down, averting my eyes.

"So you're out of jail, Teddy."

"Yeah, Doc. She—that girl's not gonna press charges. I don't know what came over me. I wonder if I'm sick or something."

"Sit down and let's talk about it. You were drinking this morning, weren't you?"

"Just one shot in a coffee cup, like always."

"A big enough shot can hit you hard on an empty stomach."

"I guess so," he agreed.

"So you went outside and saw the girl and tried to attack her."

"I—I wouldn't have—But, Doc, I saw her swimmin' naked in Duck Pond yesterday, and then there she was, right in front of me with her clothes on. I guess the drink just made me want her, and—"

"She's not even from town, Teddy. You probably saw someone else."

"No, I'd recognize that redhead anywhere. I was in the woods on top of the hill, near that grave we were fillin'. I looked down and there she was, swimmin' in the pond. I watched her come out and put on her clothes."

"So that's where you were when Cedric was looking for you."

"I guess so," he admitted. "I couldn't take my eyes off her."

"Teddy, I want you to stop drinking. You see what it can do to you. If you ever do anything like this again, you won't be so lucky. Sheriff Lens will lock you up and throw away the key."

"I know." He lowered his head again.

"All right, then. Get out of here and stay out of trouble."

"You don't think I need some sort of medicine?"

"Only common sense, Teddy."

When he'd gone, April came into my office. "Do I have any appointments tomorrow morning?" I asked her.

"Just a house call to Mrs. Wennis."

"Phone and say I'll be there after lunch. I want to attend Rose Duprey's funeral in the morning."

I went to the funeral with Sheriff Lens and we sat talking in his car for a long time before the service started. "You got no evidence, Doc," he kept insisting.

"Let me give it a try anyway."

He merely sighed, and later as we followed the funeral procession from the church at Shinn Corners to Spring Glen Cemetery he refused to talk about it. "Guesswork," was all he'd say. "We don't convict murderers on guesswork."

The warm April weather had continued, along with the sunshine,

and the day was much like the one on which Rose Duprey had died. As the procession of mourners moved toward the waiting grave, I saw Teddy and Cedric Bush standing off to one side with their shovels.

The dead woman had come from a large family and they trailed along after her husband, who led the procession alone. I turned and glanced around at the other spectators, surprised to see Dr. Fenshaw in attendance. Apparently he'd walked over from the hospital as I had on the day of Matt Xavier's funeral.

The minister stood above the coffin, saying a few words we couldn't quite hear. Soon it would be time for Teddy and Cedric to do their job. "Satisfied?" Sheriff Lens asked as the brief graveside service came to an end.

"Just about," I said. I'd seen a flicker of color in among the trees. "Come on!" I urged, breaking into a run.

"Doc, what in hell—?"

It wasn't far to the trees and I covered the distance in seconds. "The killer returned to the scene of the crime," I said, reaching out to grasp the slim wrist and pull her from behind the tree. "Sheriff, let me introduce the murderer of Rose Duprey—Miss Susan Gregger."

"You must be mad!" she screamed. "Let me go!"

Sheriff Lens looked unhappy. "Doc, I—"

But I hurried on. "You're a good swimmer, Susan. You had to be, to fall off that bridge and swim all the way down the creek to Duck Pond. With a black wig and a blouse and slacks like Rose was wearing, you could pass for her so long as I didn't get a good look at your face. When you reached the pond, you shed your wet clothes and the wig and came out to retrieve your own dry clothes. That's when Teddy Bush happened to spot you. Was it unpleasant, swimming by that dead log where Rose's body was waiting to be found?"

"I didn't kill her," she insisted. "You can't prove any of this."

I counted off the points of evidence on my fingers. "Teddy Bush saw you swimming nude in Duck Pond, and the creek flows into it. I can testify that the creek water was chilly that day—it was coming down the mountain from melting snow, after all. No one would swim nude in such cold water just to cool off. Your friend Bob Duprey indicated I might have frightened his wife by my arrival. Actually, she kept her face averted—I never got a good look at it. Since it was really you, you couldn't risk that.

"Third, Duprey and his supposed wife were just finishing sandwiches as I came along, yet the autopsy revealed that Rose Duprey's stomach was empty. Conclusion: the woman I saw fall off the bridge was someone else. Fourth, when I examined you after Teddy's would-be attack, I noticed some black-and-blue spots. But bruises wouldn't form that quickly, within minutes. The bruises were from the day before, in the creek. Fifth, Rose's body was barely bruised at all, despite supposedly being carried all that distance by the water. Why? Because she didn't travel that distance. The few bruises she had were caused by your knocking her out before you drowned her—probably right where she was found."

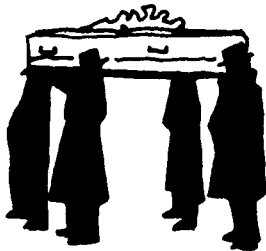
I saw Bob Duprey hurrying toward us, and Susan Gregger saw him too. "No," she said. "I'm not taking the blame for this. Bob killed her. *He* knocked her out and *he* drowned her. All I did was jump in the water in front of a witness. He wanted to divorce her and marry me, but when she found out she was pregnant she refused to let him go."

Bob Duprey was within earshot now, his face twisted with fury. "Shut up!" he shouted. "Shut up! You're convicting us both!"

That was all Sheriff Lens needed. He had his handcuffs out before Duprey could spring at the girl.

"So you see," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, "I did manage to tie Rose Duprey's drowning in with Teddy's attack on Susan Gregger. What about Matt Xavier's death, you ask? Well, no, that *was* from natural causes as far as I know.

"Next time I'll tell you about our centennial summer, and a bizarre locked-room murder that almost spoiled it."



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## CALL HIM ISHMAEL

by **GEORGE BAXT**

**H**is name is Ishmael. Remember Ishmael? Not Melville's young whaler, but the young man who made headlines for several months three years ago? Ishmael is going to kill me. That's why I'm rushing to complete this story. Time is running out. I wish *I* could.

Not that I'm afraid. I knew he'd decide to catch up with me sooner or later. I just wish there was time to complete my new novel. But I'm not even sure I can complete this story.

Three years ago I was in my usual state of grace as an absolute failure. I was forty-five years old and driving a cab nights because by day I was writing. I was the author of seven unpublished manuscripts, seven murder mysteries rejected over a period of twenty years by every publisher from here to Australia. There were the usual rejection slips and, on three occasions, threatening letters. But I was made of sterner stuff. After all, I reminded myself, I was the boy voted Most Likely To Succeed in high school. I'd beaten out my nearest rival, Joab Norton, by over thirty votes.

I waited table, I was a messenger boy, I caddied out on Long Island for several summers. For a few months I was kept by a wealthy couturiere in a very posh apartment on Fifth Avenue near the museum, but she was terribly demanding and my blood count dropped

© 1984 by George Baxt.

so dramatically my doctor insisted I give her up. That's when I started driving the cab.

I hated it. Night driving was frightening. I was held up twice and once beaten by two thugs just for kicks. But at last, at the age of forty-two, after over two decades of trying to make it as a writer, I sold an article to a midwestern magazine. It was about obscure murderers of the past who I thought were worthy of fresh recognition. It was a wicked piece that attracted some attention, and my agent, Viola Kronk (a blood sister to Ma Barker), began to get some offers for me to do other articles.

"Get enough of those under your belt," Viola said in her mellifluous voice that put me in mind of Walter Matthau, "then maybe we can start back into the market with those seven dogs of yours." Pause. "A lot of those editors who rejected them are probably dead by now."

I shall always be grateful to Viola. She stuck by me all these years when by rights she should have turned me loose with a heavy sigh of relief. She was soon to be glad she stayed with me. But I mustn't get ahead of myself.

So there I was this fateful night, in a driving downpour, cruising along Ninth Avenue after dropping a fare at West Fifty-seventh Street. There was a lot on my mind. A commission for an article on Lizzie Borden and Nance O'Neil, the actress with whom she spent the last years of her life, had come my way after some diligent research. I needed something other than taxi jockeying to augment my income because the late hours were causing me to oversleep and eating into my writing time. I had that great warm feeling that things were finally going to open up for me and I wanted all the time I could to write more articles I had in mind, and then a new novel. A really new novel, a really way-out original one, not like the other seven, which were derivative of John Dickson Carr, Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Rose Hagshleimer, my second cousin who sold me a plot. (Cribbed, I later was told by a mystery editor, from Mary Roberts Rinehart, and how low can you sink?)

That's when Destiny hailed my cab. He had come running out of a sleazy bar into the downpour yelling, "Hey, cab! Hey, you! Hey, cab!" He looked safe enough, so I picked him up. He gave me an address on lower Park Avenue. I knew the building. I caught a look at him through the rearview mirror. He was reading my license on

the dashboard. Then he settled back and said, "Hello, Douglas Sedge."

"Hello yourself," I replied, giving him what I hoped was the affable type of grin that would get me a fat tip. He started singing my high-school rallying song in a voice that was half drowned and half choked by whiskey and cigar smoke. It could have been a cute beginning for a spy story. "Do we know each other?" I asked.

He chuckled and said, "We used to. You beat me out of Boy Most Likely To Succeed."

Joab Norton? I studied his face in the rearview. "Joab! Joab Norton!" The face was puffier, the eyes were heavier, the hair was thinner, and the mouth was crueler, but it was Joab all right.

"So this is what happens to the Boy Most Likely To Succeed." Joab's tone was matter-of-fact—not insulting, although a bit patronizing. It didn't bother me. We started chatting as though we'd seen each other just a few days ago. The missing decades disappeared like some sophisticated act of magic. He invited me up to his apartment for a drink, which I needed, and luckily there was a parking space not too far from his building's imposing canopy.

I won't describe the apartment, to spare most of you the lump of envy that might rise in your throats. Suffice to say it was the home of a very wealthy man. Over the first drink, I learned he'd been a widower for over a year. There were three children, a girl and two boys. One boy was in his late teens, the other boy and girl in their early twenties. Joab owned a number of bars in the West Forties and Fifties along Ninth and Tenth Avenues, including the one where I picked him up. He also owned a lot of real estate. He wasn't flaunting his success, he was just stating the facts. And he couldn't quite disguise the aura of melancholy that seemed to surround him.

Over the second drink, I was allowed to take center stage. He listened with patient interest to my litany of failure. No, I had never married, what woman would put up with a walking disaster? Then I happily swung into the recent upturn in my career, which caused him to brighten considerably, as though the Boy Most Likely To Succeed was at last on the verge of fulfilling the prophecy, like the Marines arriving just in time to rescue a station about to surrender after a long siege.

"I have an idea," said Joab. "I've got a building on West Fifty-fifth Street, near Tenth. My janitor died last week. Bachelor. Basement apartment. It's nice and clean. If you take over his job, you can live there. I'll paint it. You can start in fresh. Then you can write when

you please. I'll pay you enough to get by on. Just look after the building, the tenants—" he stared out the window at nothing in particular "—and my son Ishmael."

"Ishmael?"

"Yeah. From *Moby Dick*. My wife was very cultured. She belonged to book clubs and ate at Schraffts before they began disappearing. My daughter, she's the middle one, she's named Melanie. My youngest, Huckleberry, wouldn't come to her funeral." He poured us fresh drinks, torched a fresh cigar, and settled back down on the sofa opposite me.

"Ishmael lives on the top floor of the building. I fixed it up for him a couple of years ago. He's got a gun collection that fills two rooms. You'll see it. I've got big connections with the cops so he has the necessary permit. He's not exactly backward, but he's not all there. He's harmless and affectionate, but he hasn't any friends—just us, the family. Some of the tenants are nice to him and he has his guns, that's it. My old super used to have him down for dinner or lunch or something every so often. Ishmael's a good talker when you let him talk, and, like his mother, he reads a lot, mostly murder mysteries." I felt a tingling at the base of my spine. "I love my boy—I love all my kids—and we're not exactly strangers to each other, but as you can see, Doug, I'm a very busy man. Will you take the job?"

Would I!

Two days later, I quit my job with the cab company and moved into the basement apartment. The building was only eight stories high, with four small apartments to each floor—except for Ishmael's exclusive domain on the top. There was a line of fire escapes at the back and a small yard below them. In no time I had the hang of tending to the furnace, emptying the garbage, washing down the halls, and getting to know the tenants.

They were a surprisingly eclectic group, and as far as I could tell none were dopers. They were mostly senior citizens, some of whom seemed to have lived there for centuries and paid next to nothing in rent because it was controlled. Joab didn't care. The building was a tax loss he needed.

It was a week before Ishmael made contact. He knew who I was—Joab had filled him in—but he took his time about introducing himself, which was fine by me. I was busy getting oriented and starting to work at the typewriter. Since I had the basement all to myself, I usually left my door open, and that Saturday Ishmael

presented himself. He stood in the doorway, and very softly said to me, "Call me Ishmael." Happily, I detected a twinkle in his eye.

I liked him right away. He looked a lot the way Joab did when we were in our teens. He had a tight, muscular body and was just a little under six feet tall. If it wasn't for the fact that he blinked his eyes a lot when he talked and kept clenching and unclenching his fists when he wasn't cracking his knuckles, I'd never have guessed there was some kind of deficiency. He was soft spoken and had a good vocabulary. Every so often some weird non sequitur would set my teeth on edge, but that was because it reminded me of my mother.

"You write," said Ishmael.

"That's what I do."

"Murder."

"That's it."

"I like murder."

"I know. Your father told me."

"Did he tell you about my collection?"

"He sure did."

"Do you like guns?"

"I like to look at them."

"Come up and see them." What a gimmick if he'd been a ladies' man! Come up and see my guns. I went up and the place was fascinating. Joab had knocked down most of the walls to create two large rooms, in addition to the small kitchen. The living room contained a large dining table, though I doubted if Ishmael served dinner to anyone but himself. The other room was festooned with guns, rifles, and ancient pistols, and there were two closets filled with ammunition. The total value must have been several hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"Have you ever been burglarized?"

"A couple of times. Dad sent some of his boys around to break a few arms and the burglaries stopped. Would you like to eat supper with me tonight?" The invitation was accompanied by a small smile, his head cocked a bit to the right, as though he was testing something.

That night was the beginning of our very strange friendship. I cooked a simple meal and we ate in my place. We discussed Joab—he respected his father—then his sister and brother. "Melanie's an actress," he told me. "She does mostly commercials. She's Miss Filth." I acknowledged having seen her a few times. She was cute. He

nodded. "She's only twenty—two years younger than I am. My brother Huck is eighteen. He's a tennis player. He's nastier than John McEnroe, but he doesn't play as good. Can I read some of your manuscripts?"

He read all seven. He didn't comment on them individually. He waited until he'd gone through the lot. In the meantime, my career spiral took a downward turn. After selling three articles, Viola began getting turndowns on all my presentations. I was grateful I had the free apartment and my pretty fair emolument from Joab, but my career frustrations were evident to Ishmael.

One Sunday afternoon, he brought back the seven manuscripts and gently placed them on my desk, as though he were laying seven corpses to rest. "These are very derivative," he said. Very astute, Ishmael, couldn't you lie a little? "But they're very well written," he added. That was better. "In fact, you write much better than the material you present. Anyway, I don't like detective fiction. I prefer true-fact crime. Like *In Cold Blood* and books about Manson and his family, The Boston Strangler, Son of Sam. That's what you should do."

"That's not a bad idea at all, Ishmael. Now all I have to do is sit around and wait for a new mass murderer to show up."

"Oh," said Ishmael, staring at the ceiling where he seemed to see something invisible to me, "you never can tell when some loony might come along. You want to go for a walk in Central Park?"

It was odd, but Ishmael had gotten my mind back on track from its recent derailment. I began to think a lot about a fact-crime book, and in time I became feverish about it. I haunted the library and went to newspaper morgues to see if there was some obscure mass murderer who hadn't yet been written about in detail. But mass murderers are rarely obscure. Viola Kronk was still supportive and thought Ishmael's suggestion was a very good one, but she needed something more specific to test on some editors.

The first two Central Park murders occurred on a Saturday night. Two joggers, unrelated, had been picked off near the reservoir. *The New York Times* gave it a few lines in the second section. The tabloids gave it heavier coverage. I clipped every item I could find. Four nights later, near the Shakespeare Theater, a young couple were shot to death.

There were five more murders in the park over the next three weeks—one near the Wollman Skating Rink, two at the zoo, and

two in the parking lot at Tavern on the Green. Now it was headlines across the country and I moved fast. I did a thirty-page outline for Viola, which she thought was terrific.

Then I began to realize Ishmael was acting strangely. I commented on it to several of the tenants, who hadn't really noticed it until I brought it to their attention. I finally discussed it with Joab when he dropped in on me one day. Ishmael was talking to himself and frequently shaking his head in frustration as though there was a problem he found too painful to cope with. Once he told me he thought someone was using his guns.

"How would they get into the apartment?" I'd asked him.

"The fire escape."

"There are bars on the windows."

He shrugged.

"They can get in. When they want to get in, they can get in. I've been burglarized before, remember?" He looked at me. "Let's change the subject. What about the murders in Central Park? Are you doing something about them?"

I told him about the treatment I'd written.

Ishmael was delighted. "It's going to make you famous," he said. I suppressed a shiver. "I can feel it. Sometimes I'm psychic. You're going to be famous. And so are my brother and sister. I'd like to be famous." His face darkened. "I'd like to be known all over the world." There was pain in his eyes. "Do you suppose I'll spend the rest of my life in my apartment with my guns? There I'll be, an old man with no one to love me. When you become famous, you'll move away." I reassured him we were friends for life, but he didn't seem convinced.

I should have guessed that what happened next was destined to occur. Ishmael gave himself up to the police as the Central Park Murderer. A frisson went through our building. Poor Joab almost went crazy. Melanie and Huckleberry posed for all the newspaper, magazine, and wire-service photographers that swarmed in on them, wallowing in the celebrity by association. Viola got me a big fat deal with a publisher. I wanted to see Ishmael, but he was in a maximum-security prison and they wouldn't let me. Only Joab and the battery of lawyers he hired to defend him could see him. I was distraught. I owed Ishmael.

The trial was a nightmare. I covered it diligently. I spent a great deal of time with Joab and we became good friends again. He told

me Ishmael spoke of me constantly and wanted me to write a good book, a masterpiece.

And I did. It was a smash hit. Book clubs galore and a seven-figure sale to a television network for a miniseries, I was offered a fortune to hit the lecture circuit.

Ishmael withered on the vine in the prison in upstate New York. He made the newspapers briefly when he was knifed by an inmate. He was in the papers again when he tried to hang himself with his bedsheet.

Joab told me Ishmael missed his celebrity—he was yesterday’s news: “He’s ignored. He’s forgotten. And you don’t write him any more, Doug.”

That was true. I had pushed Ishmael out of my mind and out of my life after feeding off his gruesome celebrity. I was wracked with guilt.

Then Joab asked a strange but chilling question.

“Had you two been planning to live together?”

I denied it, but it took me back to Ishmael’s sad comment, *When you become famous, you’ll move away*. I explained to Joab that in Ishmael’s mind I had become another father.

“He talks about escaping. He says he wants to set things right. They won’t permit it, but all he can talk about is how he wants to see you.”

I knew why. Ishmael wasn’t a genius, but he wasn’t a fool. Ishmael had to see me—to kill me. Because I have moved away. And I haven’t written to him. But it’s more than that. Ishmael knows the truth. He’s figured it out.

Sitting here in my townhouse on Hudson Street (and Joab has told him about the townhouse and my affluence and the fulfillment of everything Ishmael had prophesied), writing this paper, I marvel that the police didn’t know the answer when they read my book. Surely some law officer somewhere has read my book! Surely they’ve worked it out. Ishmael knows there’s only one sure way to get into his apartment.

*With the janitor’s duplicate set of keys.*

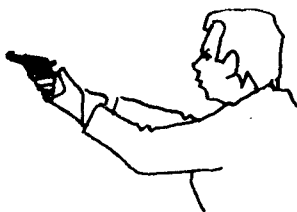
May God forgive me, because Ishmael won’t, I am the Central Park Murderer. I murdered those poor creatures with guns and ammunition I took from Ishmael’s apartment. Perhaps Ishmael knew this when he confessed, to give me my chance at success, his way of affirming his love for me. And gaining some passing celebrity for himself—which I’d known he wanted.

Oh my Ishmael! Forgive.

"Darling Evelina,

"Here's the manuscript as I promised. First crack at it for the magazine. It's a knockout and worth a fortune. You don't even have to cut that Ma Barker crack about me. Yes, it's true I've signed Ishmael as a client. Poor Doug. Dear Ishmael. I'm working with him on his book. Special dispensation and all that. There's also a Cable TV series in the works to be beamed directly from his new cell in maximum-security (which is of course to laugh). The series will be titled *Call Me Ishmael*. Let me hear from you immediately, ma chère!

Love,  
Viola"



## DETECTIVERSE

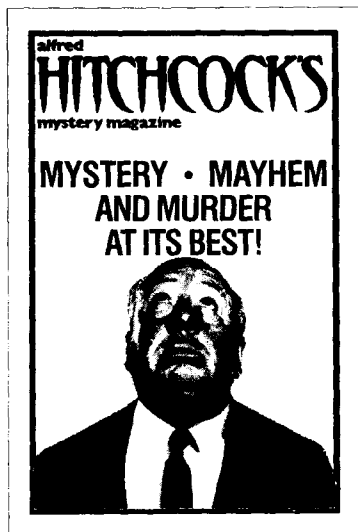
### *JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE*

by HELEN THILENIUS

The house was a blighted disgrace—  
They slaved to renew every space.  
At the housewarming both went beserk  
When a critical friend said, "With work  
You could do quite a lot with this place."

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a **NEW** short story by

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**first publication in the United States**

*Until Peter Lovesey won a thousand pounds in a crime-novel competition in England, he'd published only two books, The Kings of Distance: A Study of Five Great Runners and The Guide to British Track and Field Literature. "I had become interested in sport as a school boy," he told Diana Cooper-Clark in an interview for her collection of interviews with detective novelists, Designs of Darkness, "because I wasn't a very good athlete and would like to have been. I was flat-footed and butter-fingered and couldn't really perform very well in any team game so I tried to take up the more individual sports, like high jumping. You have heard of the Fosbury Flop—well, I was a flop before Fosbury was born."*

*Wobble to Death was Sergeant Cribb's—and Peter Lovesey's—notable debut in the mystery field, and both have been off and running since. The following story is set in the present and doesn't feature Sergeant Cribb, but it should keep you EQMM-bound from the very first line . . .*

## FALLOUT

by **PETER LOVESEY**

“I need an axe.”

Everyone in the garden shop turned to look at the man who needed an axe. He was not dressed like the other customers in blue and beige gabardine jackets and creased trousers. He was in a string

© Peter Lovesey 1983; first appeared in *Company* magazine in England, May 1983.

vest and faded jeans. His long blond hair was drawn back and fixed behind his neck with a leather bootlace. He had a silver earring. And around his neck a string of wooden beads.

Mr. Padmore, the shop owner, believed in giving all his customers the same courteous service. He had not served the man before, but he had sometimes seen him passing up the street. "An axe, sir? I think you'll find a good selection here. The size depends on the job you need it for."

"How much is that one?"

"The big one? Beautiful to handle, and razor-sharp. Twenty-one fifty."

The man picked it up and felt the weight. He put his two hands on the shaft and raised it. For one petrifying moment, Mr. Padmore thought he was about to bring it crashing down on a display of ornamental plaster animals. Instead he let the length of the shaft slip through his hands and examined the head.

"I'll take it."

He placed the axe on the counter and took a wad of crumpled banknotes from his back pocket.

Mr. Padmore grinned companionably. "Shall I wrap it? You might get arrested carrying it through the street."

"No need. I live just around the corner."

"Really?" said Mr. Padmore as he checked the money. "I ought to know you, then."

"You wouldn't. I haven't been in here before." He gave Mr. Padmore a steady look with his pale-blue eyes. "I'm not interested in gardening. I hate it."

Mr. Padmore was so anxious not to provoke a scene in his shop that he practically agreed that he, too, hated gardening. "It's a heavy commitment. No end of work. No joy in it unless you're dedicated." He added knowingly, "Nothing like a good, old-fashioned log fire to get you through the winter."

The man who needed an axe stared back at him.

Mr. Padmore explained, "I thought you wanted it for chopping firewood."

"No." The man picked the axe off the counter and walked out of the shop.

When the door closed, Mr. Padmore said to break the tension, "What else could he want it for, except to chop his neighbors into little pieces?" He turned to his next customer, who was wearing tweeds, and wanted hyacinth bulbs.

On the far side of the display of garden furniture in the center of the shop, one of Mr. Padmore's regular customers was in a state of shock. Gilbert Crawshaw happened to be the next-door neighbor of the man who had bought the axe. He had twitched with horror at Mr. Padmore's last remark.

Crawshaw was tall, which was an asset, with a narrow build, which was not. He had grey hair and black-framed bifocals. He was fifty-one, and he worked in the Treasurer's Department at County Hall, where his status was senior clerical officer. But if his career had not been notably successful, he had the consolation of a marriage which was in every way satisfactory to him. Joan understood him, cared for his house, cooked well, and was ten years younger than he, which was good for his self-esteem.

Theirs was a council house in Jubilee Road, a pleasant street in a good locality, close to the shops and surrounded by a private housing development that the estate agents described as exclusive and sought after. Crawshaw had qualified for a council house because of his job at County Hall, and he had made sure that the house he got was in Jubilee Road. He liked to think that he had helped to set the standard that made it harmonize with the gracious streets of private housing.

His fastidiously tidy garden typified his life. There was a square lawn surrounded with herbaceous border plants that he bought each spring at Mr. Padmore's and planted in the same regularly spaced arrangement. No weeds grew there. No slugs skulked under leaves. The garden was sprayed and fed with recommended products from the shop.

It had been a shock for Crawshaw eight months earlier when the new people had moved in next door. The old couple they replaced had lived there over thirty years—quiet, decent people who minded their own business and didn't keep animals. Towards the end they had tended to let the garden go and turn up the volume on the television, but you had to make allowances for old age.

These new ones—their name was Stock, or *his* was, at any rate—were disquieting in quite another respect. They had arrived in a transit van one Sunday morning with several friends, similarly long-haired and sandaled. Crawshaw had been trimming the privet in the front. He had gone inside to watch from behind the net curtains in the spare bedroom. His first suspicion was that they were squatters. All the furniture they possessed had traveled in the back of that small van. It included two mattresses and several cushions,

but no bed. There were also a number of indoor plants of a type he had never seen in the garden shop.

The next day, Crawshaw had called in at the Housing Department across the corridor from his office to check whether the house had yet been allocated. That was how he had learned that the man's name was Stock. He was now the lawful occupant. He had been given the house because he was homeless and unemployed and his wife was six months' pregnant.

"His wife?" Crawshaw had repeated. "I may be mistaken, but I don't think she wears a wedding ring."

"Wife, common-law wife, we make no distinction these days," the woman in housing had explained. "You and I may not approve, Mr. Crawshaw, but those are our instructions."

That evening, Crawshaw told his wife Joan what he had learned.

"I know," she told him. "I met them this afternoon."

Joan had a quiet style of speech that Crawshaw usually found congenial, but occasionally she shocked him. He was never certain from her mild expression whether she meant to shock.

"Met them?"

"I baked some cakes and took them round. You have to be neighborly, Gilbert. They invited me in for a coffee."

"You went in?"

"Yes," Joan answered matter-of-factly. "Poor dears, they haven't any chairs yet, so I sat on a cushion on the floor. They're really quite sweet."

"You shouldn't have done it," Crawshaw told her. "Sometimes I despair of you, Joan. We don't know what sort of people they are."

"We never will, if you have your way," she pointed out.

Crawshaw's usually pale face turned purple. "Joan, I forbid you, I absolutely forbid you to make any more overtures to Stock and his woman."

He had never spoken to her like that in their fifteen years of married life, and it stunned her into silence.

In the months since then, Crawshaw had noticed other disturbing developments. There had been parties. He had counted as many as fifty-six guests on one occasion and some of them had stayed all night. He knew because he had counted everyone who had left. About one-thirty, the music had stopped and there were still at least a dozen in the house. He was sure that if there was no music, sinister things were going on. Joan told him to be grateful of the chance to get some sleep, but he was quite unable to relax.

One evening in the summer, Crawshaw had decided to walk home through the park instead of taking his customary route down Mason's Lane and along the High Street. It had meant using the underpass to cross the railway. Halfway through the tunnel, his thoughts had been disturbed by the sound of a woman singing. Her voice had a clear tone that Crawshaw found quite pleasant until he noticed who she was and who was accompanying her on a guitar.

They were the people from next door.

She had the baby slung in front of her on a harness and was standing beside Stock, who was sitting on the stone floor with a wooden bowl between his feet to collect coins thrown by passersby. Stock actually nodded to him as Crawshaw moved stiffly past them without putting his hand anywhere near his pocket.

"Can you imagine how I felt?" he asked Joan when he got home. "Our neighbors, for heaven's sake, begging for money in a public thoroughfare!"

"It's not really begging," Joan commented.

"That's what it amounts to."

"Well, at least it's not dishonest."

"It's degrading. How would you feel if I stood in the subway strumming a guitar?"

"Certainly surprised and probably elated, if you really want to know," Joan answered, more to herself than her husband.

It didn't matter, because Crawshaw wasn't listening. He said, "I think the Social Security people ought to be told. Stock has no right to public handouts if he has an income of his own."

"Gilbert, let it rest," Joan urged.

He didn't. The next morning, before the office was open to the public, he saw the senior administrative officer in the Social Security wing. She said she was grateful for the information and they would ask Stock about it next time he came in, but these casual earnings were impossible to assess with accuracy. Crawshaw challenged this assumption. He said it was no good tamely asking Stock for information. It should be the subject of a departmental investigation. He went on to mention the parties. "I counted fifty-six guests. Anyone with the means to entertain on that scale should not be living off the state."

The senior administrative officer said she would do all she reasonably could to see that Mr. Stock was not defrauding the department, but Crawshaw heard no more about it.

That is, until the incident in the garden shop . . .

"I tell you, he bought an axe," he told Joan as soon as he got back, "and Padmore said it was obvious what he wanted it for—to attack the neighbors!"

"He must have been joking, Gilbert."

"What sort of joke is that? I don't find it funny."

Joan sighed and shook her head. "People are not very tolerant. The Stocks dress differently from most of us, so it gives rise to silly comments. It's a basic instinct, a tribal thing."

Crawshaw sniffed. "I don't need you to tell me that. I can recognize a couple of savages for myself."

"Gilbert, that's unworthy of you. I took you for a tolerant man."

"Not much use being tolerant when there's someone coming at you with an axe."

"Now you're being melodramatic. What have we ever done to antagonize Mr. Stock?"

Crawshaw turned his head and stared out of the window. He hadn't mentioned his conversation with the senior administrative officer in Social Security. Joan had tried to discourage him from reporting on the neighbors. It was no use talking to her about social duty. She hadn't progressed beyond the morality of the school playground, when "telling" was a crime.

Yet he was beginning to wish he hadn't interfered.

No more was said on the matter until midafternoon, when Crawshaw was in the garden mowing his lawn. He favored the conventional mower with a roller that left a pleasing pattern of stripes. He had sometimes looked at the rotary mowers in Padmore's shop, but they didn't give the same finish.

It was while he was making his journeys up and down the lawn that he heard a sound above the whirr of the mower. He thought at first that a stone had lodged between the blades, but when he stopped the sound persisted. It was coming from the next garden, a knock as steady as a steam-hammer.

There was a six-foot fence between the gardens, so he had to go indoors and upstairs to see what was happening.

Joan was already in the spare bedroom watching. "You see?" she said, as he joined her at the curtain. "I told you there was nothing to get alarmed about."

Crawshaw stared down at the spectacle of his neighbor Stock hacking with the axe at the only tree in the garden.

He said, "Disgusting."

"Oh, come, Gilbert," said Joan. "It's a stifling afternoon and that's

warm work. A man is entitled to take off his shirt in the privacy of his own garden. It's in no way offensive."

"I can see it doesn't offend *you*," Crawshaw commented pointedly.

Joan colored and said, "What do you mean?"

"If you really want to know," Crawshaw said with condescension in his voice, "I wasn't speaking about his naked torso when I used the word 'disgusting.' Obviously that sprang to your mind first. What I had in mind was the destruction of that apple tree, which I regard as an act of senseless vandalism. That tree is the last beautiful thing in their neglected garden, and there he is destroying it."

Joan was silent, nursing her private hurt.

"If it falls against our fence," Crawshaw went on, "he'll be hearing from my solicitor."

Joan said, "At least we know why he bought the axe." She waited for some response and, getting none, added, "He wasn't planning to attack you."

"I'm going down to finish the lawn," said Crawshaw. "No, there's no need for you to come. You carry on goggling at the ape-man."

"That's unfair, Gilbert," Joan said, but he was already on his way downstairs.

A short while later, Crawshaw looked up from his mowing and saw the top of the apple tree shudder and lurch. He stopped to watch which way it fell. There was no damage to his fence. The tree fell the other way.

He still said, "Vandal," before resuming his work. Later, he was obliged to go indoors. Stock had started a bonfire to burn the tree. Smoke was billowing across Crawshaw's garden.

"That's green wood," he told Joan as they stood in the bedroom watching. "It's not fit for burning. It'll smoke out the entire neighborhood. The man has no consideration for other people."

During that week, Stock made more bonfires, generally in the evening when Crawshaw was home from work. By sheer persistence, the wood was reduced to ashes by the weekend.

Crawshaw called at the garden shop on Saturday. He needed something to treat a patch of moss which had appeared on his lawn. Mr. Padmore selected a packet from the shelves behind the counter and handed it to Crawshaw.

"That should do the trick," he told him. "One sachet to a gallon of water. Funny you should come in, Mr. Crawshaw. We were talking about you earlier this morning."

"In what connection?" Crawshaw asked uneasily.

"Nothing personal. That neighbor of yours came in. Long-haired chap. He *does* live next door to you, doesn't he?"

Crawshaw nodded.

"That was how your name came up," said Mr. Padmore.

"Did *he* mention it?"

Mr. Padmore's mouth gave nothing away, but his eyes glittered artfully. "Don't you two get on too well?" he asked.

"We don't have much in common," Crawshaw guardedly answered.

"I can see that, Mr. Crawshaw, I can see that."

Crawshaw didn't altogether like Padmore's tone, but curiosity kept him from cutting the conversation short. He remarked, "I can't think what my neighbor would want from this shop. He hasn't shown any interest in his garden in the time he's lived there."

"He bought a spade," said Mr. Padmore. "Last week it was an axe." He winked at Crawshaw. "You keep an eye on him, Mr. Crawshaw."

"Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? What does he want with a spade if he doesn't go in for gardening? He must be planning to bury something."

When Crawshaw got home, he told Joan precisely what Mr. Padmore had said.

"And you took it seriously?" she said. "Gilbert, what's the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter with me."

"You must have a persecution complex or something."

Crawshaw reached out and gripped her by the arms so tightly she gave a cry of pain. He said, "Listen to me, will you? If anyone is behaving oddly, it's that blighter next door. You won't find me scrounging off Social Security or squatting in the subway with a begging-bowl between my legs. I don't hack down healthy fruit trees and pollute the atmosphere with filthy bonfires. Just think of that before you try your pseudo-psychology on me."

"Gilbert, you're hurting me," said Joan.

That afternoon they watched Stock use the spade to dig out the stump of the apple tree.

"Are you satisfied?" Joan asked.

Crawshaw didn't answer, so she went downstairs and put on the television.

The next morning, she was surprised to find when she woke that

her husband wasn't in bed. She checked the time and found it wasn't yet 8 A.M. It was Crawshaw's invariable custom on Sunday morning to remain in bed until 8:15 A.M. when the papers came. Joan drew on her housecoat, sensing that something disturbing had occurred.

She found him in the spare bedroom, staring out of the window, his back and shoulders rigid with tension.

"What is it, Gilbert?"

He said in a low voice that she scarcely heard, "See for yourself."

She stood at his side and looked down into the garden next door. There was no one there. There was just the hole where the stump of the apple tree had been. It had been shaped and extended into a rectangular shaft about seven feet in length and three feet wide. It was at least five feet deep.

"There must be an explanation," said Joan.

"It's a grave," whispered Crawshaw.

"It can't be," said Joan. "Let's get some breakfast."

But Crawshaw remained where he was. Joan made some coffee and took it to him, but he didn't drink it. Nor did he speak to her.

Down below, Stock had resumed his digging.

By eleven, Joan had decided to talk to the woman next door. As a pretext, she found some soft wool left over from a jacket she had knitted for her niece's baby. She took it round and offered it for their child.

The woman was very appreciative. She invited Joan in for coffee. When it was made, she called Mr. Stock in from the garden. Without Joan having to inquire, he explained what he was doing.

When Joan went back to her house, Crawshaw was still at the window in the spare bedroom. He was still in his dressing gown. He hadn't even noticed that she had gone next door.

"It's not what you think," she told him gently. "I've been talking to them. They're very concerned about the prospect of a nuclear war. Mr. Stock is building a fallout shelter."

Crawshaw said nothing then. Nearly an hour later, when Joan was putting the beef joint into the oven, she heard his voice behind her. She almost dropped the pan in surprise.

He said, "It's idiotic, trying to build a nuclear shelter."

"Possibly," conceded Joan, "but it shows a pleasing regard for the safety of his wife and child. They say it should be big enough for us as well if we care to share it with them."

"He won't get any help from me, if that's what he's after."

"I'm sure he doesn't expect it," said Joan.

Later, over lunch, Crawshaw said, "I don't suppose he got planning permission for this."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. You can't build things like that without clearing it first with the Council. There are pipes and cables and heaven knows what buried underground. There's also the danger of subsidence. He might undermine the foundations of my house."

"Gilbert, let's talk about something else."

"Not until I've settled this. Tomorrow morning I want you to go to the Borough Surveyor's Department and find out whether Stock obtained the necessary planning permission."

"You want me to go? Why me?"

"Because they know me at the Council. You needn't give your name. Everyone is entitled to look at the list."

"Then why don't you do it yourself?"

"I didn't tell you before, but you might as well know now that I reported them to Social Security. For all the good it did, I might as well have saved myself the trouble, but you see that I don't want it thought that I have a grudge against the neighbors."

"You don't want it known," said Joan quietly.

Crawshaw put down his knife and fork and said in a low voice that she found more menacing than a shout, "You will do as I say. If you choose to defy me, you must suffer the consequences."

He had frightened her. There had been no violence in their marriage, but she knew him well enough to fear the force of retribution in his character. She knew better than to rouse it.

Next morning, she did as he instructed. She went to the Borough Surveyor's Department and inquired whether there was planning permission for a nuclear fallout shelter at 9 Jubilee Road. To her amazement and relief, the clerk confirmed that there was. He got out the detailed plan for Joan to examine. It had the Council stamp on it, and the signature of the Borough Surveyor.

She thought her morning's work would bring reassurance to her husband, but she should have known better. When she told him that evening, he accepted the information with a shrug and went upstairs to take another look at the excavations.

Through that summer, Crawshaw kept vigil for hours on end in the spare bedroom. Joan rarely saw him except when it was too dark to stare out of the window. Their own garden began to show signs

of neglect. Daisies and dandelions flourished on the lawn. The flowerbeds dried out in the warm spell at the end of August.

Joan often spoke to the people next door. She always found them friendly. They told her that the shelter would be ready before the winter. The main chamber was complete. There was still construction work inside, to fit it out and make it habitable.

One evening in October, Crawshaw came downstairs and said, "You've been talking to them again, haven't you?"

Joan answered, "There's no law against it, Gilbert. They *are* our neighbors. And you must admit I don't get much conversation with you these days."

He ignored that. "What's happening with the shelter?"

"Well, if you don't know, I'm sure I don't."

"He's working underground now. I can't see what he's doing."

"How maddening for you."

"Don't be provocative, Joan. You've been talking to them. Tell me what's going on."

"Why don't you ask them yourself? It wouldn't hurt to exchange a few civil words, Gilbert. They're very approachable people."

He glared at her, and said no more. She felt for the first time in months that she had won a point.

One evening later in the week, he asked, "Is the digging finished?"

Joan looked up and answered mildly, "I haven't inquired."

"Have you looked inside? Have they shown it to you?"

"Gilbert, I'm not interested in looking inside their shelter. I'm sure Mr. Stock would be delighted to show it to you if you asked him."

"I think he's still extending it," said Crawshaw. "He wouldn't want me to see it."

"Oh, that's it, is it? You think he's burrowing like a mole. Under the fence and under our garden? Perhaps that's why our clematis died."

Crawshaw's eyes widened. "Has it?"

Joan was not sure what had prompted her to mention the clematis. She knew she was making mischief. The combination of a baking sun and the lack of any watering had killed the clematis. Gilbert had not even noticed its demise, but he would seize on it as evidence of subterranean invasion.

He took the next day off from work, something he had never done in his life apart from a few days for illness. By 8 A.M., he was out with his spade and wheelbarrow. Joan supposed at first that he

intended catching up on the backlog of weeding, but it was soon apparent that he was otherwise engaged.

He was digging a hole.

He had started in the flowerbed where the dead clematis was, beside the fence separating their garden from the Stocks'. By lunch-time, the hole had developed into a trench. By midafternoon, the trench extended along the length of the fence. Plants and young trees that Crawshaw had tended for years were dug out and left to wither on the piles of topsoil and clay. He was working like a man possessed.

About 4 P.M., Joan went out to him and said, "Gilbert, you're destroying our garden."

Crawshaw carried on digging. He was chest-deep in the trench. "Better than having it destroyed by someone else."

"What are you doing this for?"

"To find where the damned shelter comes out."

"It isn't in our garden, Gilbert."

"It is. You'll see."

"I saw the plans," said Joan.

"Plans!" said Crawshaw, spitting into the trench.

Joan looked up at the house next door and noticed Mr. and Mrs. Stock standing at their bedroom window staring down at them. They didn't have net curtains. She ran indoors.

Crawshaw didn't come in from the garden until after eight. By then it was dark and raining and the wet mud was gleaming on his clothes and body. He was standing in the kitchen doorway holding out a plug attached to a length of cable. "Plug that in, would you?"

"You're not carrying on with this?" said Joan in disbelief.

"It's dark. I need a lamp."

"You'll get pneumonia."

"Do as I tell you. I haven't time to stand here talking."

She sighed, took the plug, and pressed it into the socket. "Why, Gilbert? At least tell me why."

He laughed.

It was so unusual for him to laugh that Joan found it no comfort at all.

Crawshaw said smugly, "I've found it. I've found the top edge of his infernal shelter projecting nearly three feet into our garden. I knew I'd find it if I went deep enough. And now I'm going to attack it with a sledge and crowbar. It might withstand a nuclear blast,

but it won't stop me from exercising my rights as the lawful tenant of this land. Do you want to try and stop me?"

Joan answered quietly, "You must do as you think fit, Gilbert."

As soon as he had gone, she went out through the front and knocked on the Stocks' door. Mr. Stock opened it. He said, "You look as if you could do with a drink."

He invited her in. They were very kind to her. They produced a glass of sherry. She was grateful. She explained about the digging and said, "Gilbert says he has found something. He's convinced that it must be your shelter."

Mr. Stock shook his head. "Impossible. It stops at least five feet our side of the fence. There's nothing underground on your side except the conduit for the main electric cable. I saw the plans. God, if he cuts through that—" He got up and went to the window, but before he reached it, the lights went out.

In the garden next door, the lights had gone out forever for Gilbert Crawshaw.

And in the darkness of the Stocks' living room, Joan Crawshaw permitted herself a sigh. No one else could have noticed that it was more a sigh of relief than regret. She was free.

She, too, had taken note of those plans.

"Q"

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a **NEW** Henry Turnbuckle story by

**JACK RITCHIE**

*"What's he doing?" Pamela asked as Henry paced.*

*"He's deducting," Ralph said. "He deducts like crazy ninety-eight percent of the way and then always stumbles over the last two percent."*

*This is the last story Jack Ritchie wrote before his death in April 1983. It was sent to us by Jack's good friend and agent, Larry Sternig, and was, as always, perfectly typed by Jack, in spite of the fact that he had not been well for some time. Jack was a gentle, discerning man and a total professional. This last story is full of the offbeat humor that Edward D. Hoch has described as Ritchie's trademark. Savor it, as he would want you to . . .*

## THE TWO PERCENT SOLUTION

by **JACK RITCHIE**

The fire department's arson squad decided that the fire had been of suspicious origin.

Lieutenant Morrison relayed the facts to Ralph and me. "It was a two-story frame house. According to neighbors, the fire broke out at approximately nine-thirty last night. We got there less than five minutes after the alarm was turned in, but by then the house was totally in flames. It looks to us like the fire started almost simultaneously in three separate places inside the house. I'd say it was the work of an amateur. A professional wouldn't have been that obvious."

"Ah," I said. "And who owned the building?"

"A James and a Pamela Wentworth."

I grasped the picture immediately. "Man and wife, of course."

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"No. Brother and sister. They bought the place just three weeks ago."

I chuckled knowingly. "I assume that they had it fully insured? Especially against fire?"

Lieutenant Morrison nodded. "But I think they're going to have trouble collecting from the insurance company."

"And where were these Wentworths when the conflagration began?"

"They claim they were at a movie with their parents. *Tootsie*. We can't find anybody to corroborate that. Besides the family members, of course."

I pondered. "Possibly they're telling the absolute truth. After all, they could have hired someone to commit their arson for them."

Ralph put his oar in. "Henry, if they hired someone to do their dirty work, wouldn't they have worked up a solid alibi? From someone outside the family? And wouldn't they have hired a professional, not some bungler?"

"Ideally, yes, Ralph. However, we are in the world of the practical. More than likely they didn't know *where* to hire a professional arsonist." I cogitated further. "It now occurs to me that they couldn't even find a willing amateur. Hence the sorry alibi. So they had to do the job themselves. Do they have any flimsy explanation for the fire?"

"They say it must have been the work of a firebug."

"Were these four Wentworths the only occupants of the house?"

"Just James and Pamela Wentworth. Their parents have a house of their own about two miles away. Actually, the two younger Wentworths are house renovators. They buy an old home and move in and begin remodeling the place. When they're through, they sell the building, buy another, and do the same thing all over again."

"Have they coincidentally lost any other homes by fire?"

"Not that we know of. They've been in the renovating business for about three years."

"And where can we find them now?"

"At their parents' home."

After getting the address of the senior Wentworths, Ralph and I drove to that residence. It was a fair-sized ranch house in one of the northern suburbs.

A dark-haired young woman with wary violet eyes answered the door and did not let us enter until we thoroughly identified ourselves.

"My brother's out looking for another house," she said. "And my parents are out jogging. They're entered in the Boston Marathon again this year."

"Madam," I said, "I think it is only fair to tell you that you are one of the prime suspects in a case of arson."

She acknowledged that. "So I've been told by the fire department."

"I understand that the house which burned down was insured?"

"Of course. We couldn't have gotten the mortgage without it."

"Mortgage?"

She explained. "Jimmy and I haven't been in the business of fixing up old houses so long that we can just plunk down cash and buy any place outright. That means we make the minimum downpayment and get a mortgage for the rest. In this case, with the Marine State Bank. In other words, while the place was insured, the mortgage holder gets first crack at the fire insurance, and that means most of it. Actually, we lose more than our downpayment because we also lost our table saw, drill press, jointer, and a flock of portable power tools in the fire, not to mention all the building materials we'd already bought and stored inside. None of that was insured. So we lost a bundle. Now what does that do to our motive for setting the house on fire?"

Just about kills it, I thought, but I do not give up easily. "So you and your brother are house renovators?"

"I'm so glad you guessed. Actually, I have a degree in English, but there isn't much call for English teachers these days so I went into the renovation business with my brother. Our father's a building contractor and we've been in the proximity of tools and construction all our lives. The transition wasn't too difficult."

Ralph seemed to wake up. "The Boston Marathon?"

She nodded. "Mother came in two hundred and eighty-first last year. Dad dropped out after the first mile with a stitch in his side."

I doggedly pursued my reason for being there. "You and your brother do all of the renovating work yourselves?"

"Most of it. However, the city code requires that we hire licensed people for the plumbing and the electrical wiring."

"How far along had you gotten with this renovation?"

"Not too far. But we thought we'd have it all finished in about three months."

I smiled wisely. "When one acquires an old house for renovation, there are always some unexpected surprises, are there not? *Expen-*

sive surprises? Surprises one did not anticipate when one purchased the building? Some major structural defects, for instance?"

"There are always some surprises, even when you know what you're doing."

"And might one not suddenly discover that if one completed *all* of the renovation required, one might actually lose money on the project? Perhaps a great deal of money?"

She smiled sweetly. "And so realizing that we would lose our shirts if we went on with the renovation we decided it made more sense economically to burn down the house and try to at least break even on the insurance? You forgot about the tools we lost."

"Madam," I said, "at the moment I have been presented with no solid or melted evidence that there *were* tools in the house, much less building materials."

I began pacing back and forth.

"What's he doing?" Pamela asked Ralph.

"He's deducting," Ralph said. "He deducts like crazy ninety-eight percent of the way and then always stumbles over the last two percent."

Not *always*.

"Ralph," I said, "aside from psychotic disturbance, what is usually the motive for arson?"

"Money," he said.

I nodded approvingly. "Now, why would a man, a woman, or both of them, possibly in collusion with their parents, deliberately burn down a house, destroying their tools and materials in the process?"

"I give up," Pamela said. "Why?"

"For *more* money than they lost, of course. Perhaps quite a bit more. Enough to make it all worthwhile, including the risk of being nailed for arson."

Pamela smiled again. "Show me."

I paced for a few moments more as I wrestled the pieces together.

"When Henry was in high school," Ralph said, "he reconstructed a dinosaur from just one bone."

Actually it turned out to be a Sheboygan pterodactyl.

"By George, Ralph," I said, "when people renovate old houses, they invariably tear down walls, remove partitions, and indulge in various other demolitions, do they not?"

Ralph agreed.

I approached the obvious solution to the case obliquely. "Miss

Wentworth, when you bought this house, did you evict or otherwise displace the owner or tenant?"

"No. The place was vacant a month before we bought it."

"Aha," I said. "Then I put it to you that when you and your brother began the renovation, you found something of great value. Perhaps behind a partition or a wall. Something that made it worthwhile to stoop to arson."

"All right," Pamela said. "What did we find?"

"For openers, we will assume that it was money."

"So we found money. Why didn't we just take it? Why burn down the house?"

"Because the money did not belong to you."

"Jimminies. Who *did* it belong to?"

"Certainly not to the person who lived there last, since he certainly would have taken it with him when he left. No, the money was concealed behind that wall or partition by another individual—someone who was not in a position to reclaim it when you purchased the house."

"That still doesn't explain why we couldn't have just pocketed the money. I hate to be repetitious, but why burn down the whole blasted house?"

I smiled grimly. "Because you realized it would be risky—even dangerous—to simply take the money. The house had to be destroyed so that whoever had put that money there in the first place would assume it had been consumed by an unfortunate fire." I targeted further. "Therefore, I deduce that the money must have been identifiable in some way. In other words, by merely looking at it one would know to whom it really belonged."

"And what identification could that possibly have been?" Pamela asked tartly.

"I believe that the individual stacks of bills were identifiable by the print on the strips of paper holding them together. Perhaps the name of a bank. And I am certain also that it was *stolen* money. You, of course, immediately grasped that fact when you saw it and you knew that the original thief would one day come back to reclaim his ill-gotten loot and, not finding it, easily determine who had perpetrated the house renovation and come looking for you with blood in his eye."

Pamela sighed. "And why would the thief want to stash the money in our building in the first place?"

"It wasn't your building when he did. And he had no other choice.

He did not want it to be found on his person nor his immediate proximity—so he hid it in the vacant house until such time as he could reclaim it without jeopardy to his person or freedom.”

Pamela looked at the ceiling. “I would have liked to see that dinosaur. I’ll bet it looked more like a pterodactyl.”

Someone must have told her. “Ralph,” I said, “think back in time. To the period of thirty or so days when this house was totally unoccupied.”

Ralph thought back. “So?”

“If you will remember, during that period the Cream City Second National Bank was robbed of some sixty thousand dollars by a lone gunman. He escaped the scene of the robbery—however, the surveillance camera at the bank neatly captured his features and he was identified as an ex-convict with quite a record, including bank robbery and violent assault. It was in all the papers and I’m certain that everyone in this room must have read about it.”

I continued relentlessly. “*However*, the sixty thousand dollars has not been recovered, and the criminal, one Elwood McCluskey, has refused to reveal where it is, not to mention optimistically pleading not guilty. It is evident what actually happened. After the robbery, deciding to take no chances and sensing that he was a prime candidate for questioning, McCluskey decided he had to hide the money somewhere until things cooled down.”

“Hold it right there,” Pamela interposed. “You mean to say that after he robbed the bank, he rode around the city looking for a convenient vacant house? How did he *know* that particular house was vacant? There wasn’t even a For Sale sign out there when we bought the place and there were curtains or blinds on all the windows. Only the neighbors would have known it was vacant.”

I nodded sagely. “Exactly. Therefore I unerringly deduce that it wasn’t necessary for him to cruise the town looking for an appropriate empty house. He *knew* where he could find one, because it was near his domicile, apartment, or whatever.”

Ralph thought about that and then headed for the phone.

When he came back, he took me out of Pamela’s hearing. “Henry, when McCluskey was picked up, it was in an apartment building just down the block.” He also supplied another bit of information. “Most of the bills were new, so the bank has the serial numbers.”

I returned to Pamela. “If you are ready to confess, I am receptive.”

“Ha,” she said definitively. “Where is your proof?”

"Henry never has any proof," Ralph said. "He leaves that to the technicians."

"We will search this house," I announced.

"Naturally you have a warrant?"

"Well, no, not at the moment. However, we shall get one."

"And what judge would issue one just on your deductions alone?"

I rubbed my jaw. Frankly, I *had* been having a little difficulty lately getting search warrants from Judge Williams. And Richfield. And Wisniewski.

Pamela folded her arms. "No warrant, no search. No proof, no confession."

I eyed her sternly. "Very well, but we shall keep a keen eye on you. We will pursue without surcease. And if you attempt to spend any of the money, we will swoop down upon you."

Ralph and I left shortly thereafter with the intention of returning later to question Pamela's brother.

I directed our car on a shortcut through the neighboring park. We passed a middle-aged but trim woman enthusiastically jogging down an asphalt path. Around one of the bends farther on we observed a middle-aged man, not so trim but also in a jogging outfit, lolling on a park bench. Smiling.

My mind was dappled with discontent. Had I once again, in this case, stubbed my intellectual toe on that invidious two percent? But then, who else but one, two, or all four of the Wentworths could possibly have taken that money and burned down the house?

And then inspiration descended. But, of course!

I slowed the car, made a U-turn, and headed back to the Wentworth residence.

Ralph looked at me with his usual caution. "What now?"

"I believe I now know who filched that hidden money."

"Who?"

"I don't know his name yet, but I'm going to find out."

When we reached the Wentworth house, Pamela let us in. "Is this an encore?"

"Miss Wentworth," I said, "I distinctly heard you say that you and your brother do *all* the renovating in the houses you buy, with the exception of the electrical wiring and the plumbing."

She nodded confirmation. "We haven't gotten to the wiring yet, but we did have some new plumbing installed."

"Aha," I said triumphantly. "And what is the name of this light-fingered plumber?"

"Lance Pfeiffer."

I chuckled. "He is our man. He discovered that money while installing the new plumbing. Being a newspaper reader, when he saw the strips of paper about the bills, he immediately realized that they had come from a bank which had been recently robbed. He also realized that perhaps the thief would reveal where he had hidden the bills in the hope of a lighter sentence. And so, especially since he had no equity in the building or money invested in tools and building materials, he decided to take the money and burn down the house to cover up his deed."

Pamela blinked. "Come to think of it, Pfeiffer was there the day of the fire and I happened to mention to him that all of us were going to see *Tootsie* that night."

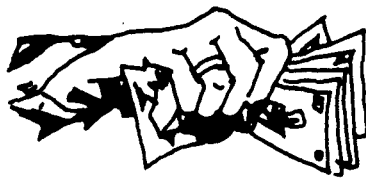
Unfortunately, based on my impeccable deductions alone, I was unable to secure a search warrant from Judge Williams. Or Richfield. Or Wisniewski. Or anybody.

However, fortunately, only hours later, Lance Pfeiffer was picked up when he attempted to buy a Toyota with cash. The suspicious car salesman, wondering if the new bills might be counterfeit, notified the police and one thing followed another.

After the story appeared in the newspapers, I phoned Pamela. "It has occurred to me that I may have been a bit hasty and arbitrary when I accused you of appropriating the cache and burning down your own building."

"I do not take apologies over the telephone. There has to be eye-to-eye contact. We're all going to a movie again tonight. *Gandhi*. Do you want to come along?"

That hadn't been exactly what I had anticipated. But at least it was a beginning.



*"Craskin," Peter Hopp said, "Beverly is right—you're mad."*

## NICE ONE

**by WILLIAM BANKIER**

The first time some humorist called Mark Craskin "Crass" it hurt. The nickname labeled him as something less than the man he dreamed of being, struck him like something nasty thrown from a bucket. But he concealed his true feelings and pretended it was what he had always wanted.

"Crass has an announcement to make," he would say and the group would shut up and listen. They knew they could always count on Crass to make it an interesting day.

"It's time my career as an artist was rewarded," he said to Peter Hopp and Beverly Lacombe, who were his companions that afternoon in a booth at La Boheme coffee shop. The door was open, allowing the balmy August atmosphere to circulate, persuading people to drift and pretend they were in Naples instead of Montreal. The cups of this arrogant trio had been empty for almost an hour but the waiter didn't seem to care.

"What career? What artist?" Beverly asked him. She had beautiful black Indian eyes from her French-Canadian father and a plait of thick auburn hair.

"Look around you," Crass said, indicating the framed landscapes mounted on the restaurant walls, one over every booth. "Evidence of my talent is everywhere."

"Nice one!" said Peter Hopp. He was tanned and bearded and impressively overweight.

Beverly craned forward on one elbow and peered at a business card pinned to the wall under their painting. "Somebody named E. R. Renwick is claiming credit for your work. Here's his name and phone number."

*"Pas de problème, as we say on de Bullion Street."* Crass took a felt-tipped pen from his pocket. Unlike his bohemian friends, he wore a jacket and a shirt with a collar. The costume suited his close,

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executive-style haircut and the busy, seeking expression on his concave face. "All we do is make an adjustment on yon telephone number." He drew a line through Renwick's number and printed his own neatly beneath it. "Now," he said, sitting back in the booth, "let the purchase orders come rolling in."

"You're a madman," Beverly said, shifting her position in the giant beanbag under a wide-open window in Craskin's loft apartment. "You'll never fool anybody that you're an artist."

Crass posed with an oil painting held under his chin like a kindergarten child showing and telling. "Cost me five dollars from a starving artist in Dominion Square," he said. "When somebody telephones, I'll invite him up, do my Matisse number, charge fifty bucks, and we're away."

"You'll never get away with it."

"Nobody will call you," Peter said.

"I have to go home," Beverly said. She kissed the boys goodbye.

When she was gone, Peter looked at his watch. "I can still make my job interview."

"What for?" Crass said. "Do you want to be trapped inside an office all summer? The town is crawling with tourists. Worry about a job in the winter."

"You may be right."

They smoked a few cigarettes and listened to the top twenty on the radio while the sun went down behind a building and the city began to cool off. Then Peter went out and bought six cans of beer and a pizza. On his way back, he decided this was the life. Here were all these straight characters running around earning big salaries and paying into pension funds to finance their old age. But who could guarantee that old age would not be canceled without notice? When he carried his purchase into the loft, he found Crass hugging himself with satisfaction mixed with panic. "I had a telephone call. A guy is coming up to talk about buying a painting."

"So soon?"

"Why not? He said he was in La Boheme and saw the phone number. I was so surprised, I started laughing. At first I thought it was you putting on a voice. He must have thought I was crazy, then decided, what the hell, I'm an artist."

They attacked the pizza while it was hot and got through two beers each before they heard footsteps on the stairs followed by a knock at the door. Crass opened it and let in a man who was so

much his type that Peter had to put a hand over his mouth. The newcomer was short and thin, dressed in a business suit, and when he took off his straw fedora hat he revealed a neat haircut and a pair of pale, hesitant eyes.

"Mr. Renwick?" he said.

It took Crass a moment to remember that was the name of the artist. "That's me," he said. "I suppose you want to buy a painting."

"I like what I saw in the restaurant. Are they all for sale?"

"And others." Crass picked up the oil he had purchased that afternoon in the square. "Here's my latest. The view is of the cathedral. I can let you have this for fifty dollars."

The visitor took the painting and held it at arm's length near the window. He seemed in no hurry to commit himself. In the silence, Peter said: "First time in Montreal?"

"No, I've been here quite a while." He handed the sketch back to Crasskin. "This is quite a different style from the works in the restaurant."

"I use different styles all the time."

The visitor nodded and folded his arms. "Refresh my memory," he said. "What materials did you use for the canvases in La Boheme?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are they oils or are they tempera? Or water colors? What did you use?"

"Oh. Well—different things. Mostly, they're oil paintings."

"That's incredible."

"You like them?"

"That you would try to pass yourself off as the artist. You don't know *anything* about painting."

Crass went to the door and opened it. "Feel free to leave," he said.

"You've got a hell of a nerve," the man said. "An artist wears himself out trying to sell his work. He gets some things displayed at last and you come along like some damned pirate and try to steal the sale."

"I'm the artist's agent. I don't have to know about painting, I get a commission on what I sell for him."

"You're Renwick's agent? Is that your story now?"

"I never said I was anything else."

"You're lying again," the visitor said. "I happen to know Renwick doesn't have an agent."

Crass left the open doorway, approached the visitor, and seized him by the arm. "Get out of here."

The man shrugged his arm away. "You guys are in big trouble. Have you ever seen Renwick? I saw him once on a TV interview. He's built like a lumberjack and they say he's crazy half the time. When I tell him what you're doing, he'll come up here and take the law into his own hands."

"Then you'd better go and tell him," Crass said, boiling over with exasperation. The thing he hated most was the failure of one of his schemes to take off. He struggled for another grip on the stranger's arm. "Are you going to help me, Peter, or are you just going to stand there?"

Peter felt a premonition of bad things about to happen. "Let him walk away. He's going."

"Now! I want him out now!" A forcible ejection would be one kind of success.

As the visitor flung up his hands to ward off Crasskin's efforts, Peter decided to help. Shambling forward like a bear in overalls, he locked an arm around the neat head and dragged the man toward the door. Crass pushed from the other side and together they soon had him on the landing. Then it was his own fault as much as anything that he lost his balance when they released him and he went head over heels down fifteen iron-edged steps like a Hollywood stuntman. Crass picked up his hat and tossed it after him. "And don't come back."

The hat floated down and settled on the prostrate form of the prospective art-buyer. Nothing moved—including the two young men looking down from above.

"He's knocked himself out," Crass said. Then: "Hey!" he called down. "Don't make an opera out of it!"

"We better take a look at him," Peter suggested.

Crass hurried down and turned over the body. He put the palm of his hand on the chest, listened to the face, lifted an eyelid. "I think he's checked out."

"Nice one," Peter said with irony.

They carried him back up into the apartment and laid him on a sofa. Crass went and closed the door. He came back smiling. "We're lucky, Pete."

Even a friend as familiar as Peter Hopp was with the Crass logic had to be astonished by this assessment of the situation. "We threw a guy downstairs and killed him," he said. "Lucky?"

"Because he was going to report us to that big painter. Now he won't tell anybody anything."

"But he's dead, Crass. I think the police call it manslaughter."

"Only if they find out about it."

"You mean we're going to get rid of the body? Do you know how many murder stories have that as their big hassle?"

"Nothing complicated, don't worry. We wait until it gets late and the streets are quiet. Then we take him between us like guys walking a drunk friend home. We deliver him onto the McGill campus and lay him down on the grass. In the morning, they pick him up as a mugging victim."

"Craskin, Beverly is right—you're mad."

"It's easy. Hell, Peter, it's fun."

"The guy just came up here to buy a painting."

"We didn't intend to hurt him. It was an accident." Crass peered into Pete's hairy features. "And listen, honey, you're the bouncer around here. You did most of the push and shove."

Peter thought about going somewhere far away but he knew he didn't have the money or the ambition to get off the island. "Beverly is wrong," he said. "I'm the one who's mad. All right, what do we do?"

"First we empty his pockets," Crass said, "so it will look like a mugging. —We may end up rich."

They didn't. The man had thirty-five dollars in his wallet plus five and change in his pants. He also had identification that astonished the boys. According to various credit cards, they had killed a citizen named Edgar R. Renwick. Establishing him still further as the painter whose income Craskin had tried to usurp was a letter addressed to him from the Montreal Art Directors Club.

"So he's an ad-agency guy," Peter said, "who paints in his spare time."

"That explains the nine-to-five appearance," Crass acknowledged. "That's why we thought he was a businessman."

As they drank more beer, waiting for the traffic to thin out downstairs, Pete said: "What you did was a lot worse than trying to take a fee for one of his paintings. You were stealing his fame. If the trick had worked, he never would have gotten the credit for doing that piece of work."

"You're becoming a philosopher in your old age," Crass told him.

After eleven o'clock, they took the body downstairs between them, transporting him as Crass had planned it, one on either side, his arms across their shoulders, his feet half dragging, half stumbling,

Peter carrying the straw fedora. When they reached the street, he jammed it on Renwick's head, snap-brim well down over the face.

They had begun to move toward the entrance to the university campus when Crass said: "Would you believe it? The last person I wanted to run into . . ."

Beverly Lacombe was slowing down in her convertible on the other side of the road. She was about to make a U-turn to draw up beside them. "Let's let her in on it," Pete said. "She can drive up farther away."

"Why? What's the point? The campus is the place for him to be mugged. Besides, she's so straight she has trouble sitting down. She'd be bound to tell somebody. Keep this between you and me."

"Hey," Beverly called as she drew level, "who's your friend?"

"A guy we met in the tavern. He's smashed—we're taking him home."

"That U-turn is against the law," Crass said. "The streets are full of crime."

"Load him in," Beverly said. "I'll drive you."

"Not a good idea," Crass said. "He threw up in the alley, he may do it again."

"Forget I offered." Bev leaned across the seat and tried to peer up under the brim of the hat.

"I don't like the way he looks."

"He looks the way I have often felt." Crass saw two policemen patrolling near the university entrance a hundred yards away. He made up his mind quickly. "Okay, in we go." They were beside the doors of a Metro station. "Taking a Cremazie train," he told Beverly. He managed the shifting of the heavy door and the awkward job of maneuvering Renwick's body through and onto an escalator.

"What are we doing here?" Peter asked.

"There were cops coming our way, didn't you see them? Besides, this is going to be better. We'll get him onto a quiet car and prop him in a corner. When the people who see us get on have left the train, we get off at the next station and Renwick rides on. Where and when they find him, nobody knows."

"That's brilliant, Crass."

"I even have a book of tickets in my pocket. We won't have to go near the guy in the booth."

The guard was dozing over a first edition of one of the morning papers. Having become expert with their lifeless companion, Crass and Pete negotiated the turnstile, rode down another escalator, and

were able to walk to the quiet end of the east-bound platform by the time a train rolled in. The doors glided open and they went aboard. There were only three passengers, all singles, and they paid minimal attention to the trio who made their way to the end of the car. Crass and Pete propped their passed-out friend in the end seat, back and shoulder against the wall, hat well down against the light. The train moved on.

At the next station, all three passengers went to stand at the doors.

"Should we wait a few more stops?" Peter said.

"No reason. Once they've gone, nobody knows where this guy came aboard. Let them leave, then it's us."

It worked. The three strangers left and nobody else got on. Just before the doors closed, Crass and Pete faded through, leaving the car with only one occupant—the body of E. R. Renwick.

They walked up and over to the west-bound platform and rode the next train back to their station. It was all over twenty minutes after they had carried their burden down the stairs.

On the street, Crass behaved as if he was euphoric. He mimed a series of body-blows to his friend's torso. "Fabulous!" he said. "Let's go and have a drink!"

"I can't face that now."

"Then come up to the loft. We have to talk about this."

"Not me. I feel sick, Crass. This is a terrible thing we've done."

"It was an accident—do I have to keep telling you? Anyway, we cleaned him out, they'll assume he was hit and robbed. And there's nothing on him to connect him with us."

"Beverly saw us."

"She'll never make the connection. At the most, there'll be a few lines in the paper. She won't even see it. Come on."

"No, I'm going home."

Crass frowned. His friend's mood was not good. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to that job interview. I gotta get busy."

"You must be nuts. The whole summer ahead of us . . ."

"That's what scares me."

Mark Craskin went upstairs, let himself into the loft, and went around turning on lights. Since the main scuffle with Renwick had taken place on the landing, there was nothing in the apartment to

show the man had been here except for the cheap painting from Dominion Square. There was no reason why Crass shouldn't buy a painting if he wanted to, but on the remote chance that somebody might ask him if he was an art lover, he decided to put the painting out of sight. Then he turned on the radio and opened the last can of beer. A cold slice of pizza should have tasted terrible but he was halfway through it before he realized what he was eating. Through the open window, he heard the first hesitant spatter of rain deciding to fall.

It was to be expected that today's events would shake him. Never in his wildest fantasies had it occurred to him that he would ever kill somebody. This escapade had been more a prank than anything else. He had never really expected to get a response from a "customer." Raising a laugh from his friends had been the reward he was after.

It could be argued that Renwick himself was considerably to blame. If Craskin was playing a game, so was the artist, coming up and pretending he was a customer, putting Crass on and letting him tell a lot of lies. All Renwick had needed to do was telephone the bogus number, say he was the artist and he didn't appreciate people defacing his business cards. End of situation—Crass with egg on his face and E. R. Renwick still alive.

Experiencing righteous anger, Craskin went to bed. The connection was made in his mind just before he fell asleep—he and the dapper little artist were brothers under the skin. By printing his telephone number on the card, Craskin had insinuated himself into Renwick's life. Why? Because he was curious and, in a way, adventurous.

Renwick himself was the same. Instead of making the obvious telephone call to cure the situation, he felt impelled to meet the man whose fraud he had discovered. Handled another way, the confrontation might have turned to friendship, with Craskin pouring drinks as he spoke in praise of Renwick's work. "I had to claim your paintings, man—they're so damned good."

Now nothing would ever happen, the case was closed. He wondered for the first time if the artist had left a widow, perhaps children. Maybe someday, when enough time had passed, he would look up the Renwick family and buy one of his paintings for a large sum of money. He would save toward that end. This idea settled Crass's mind and gave him relief. He knew he ought to pay for what he had done and here was the method . . .

A knock at the door in the middle of the night woke Craskin. He saw the time was three o'clock. He struggled into the raincoat he used as a dressing gown and went to the door with bare legs and feet exposed in a comic posture. Two men were there, the big one in a police uniform.

"Mr. Renwick?" the man in the suit asked, stopping Craskin's heart for a moment.

"No."

"Do you know anybody named Renwick?"

"No, I don't."

"May we come inside? I'd like to ask you a few questions."

The detective sat on the sofa and Craskin on a chair at the table while the constable stood near the door. "A dead man was found on a Metro train this evening. He'd been hit on the head or else he fell or was pushed. Somebody must have carried him onto the train and left him there. He'd been robbed—no wallet, no money, no papers in his pockets."

"Wow," Craskin said, "the muggers are taking over. I thought it was safe on the Metro."

"You may be right it was a mugging. We're not sure."

When the detective went quiet, Craskin had to say: "Why are you talking to me?"

"Because the body wasn't completely clean. Whoever frisked him forgot the breast pocket of his jacket." The detective took out his wallet and produced a business card. "This card carries the name of E. R. Renwick and a telephone number printed on it which we traced to this address and to the name Mark Craskin. This is your number?"

Craskin made a business of looking.

"That's it, all right."

"And you've never heard of anybody named Renwick?"

"No."

The detective glanced at the policeman and back at Crass. "My guess is this will take about half an hour. Let's go over to the station."

Craskin put on some clothes and rode through the night to a police station on Maisonneuve Boulevard. The detective's prediction was wrong—he held out until five-thirty before he admitted his involvement and described what had happened.

"You never took him onto that train alone," the detective said. "Who helped you?"

"My friend, Pete," Craskin said, seeing no reason not to distribute the blame. "Peter Hopp. This is his address."

Craskin was drinking coffee when they brought his friend through, looking pouchy-eyed but calm. They had a moment to exchange a word before the newcomer was taken in to be questioned. "I thought we might as well go all the way together on this," Crass said.

Big, hairy Pete looked down at his manacled hands. "Nice one," he said.



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# ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

## CRIME BEAT

by **R. E. PORTER**

**THE MEDICAL SHERLOCK HOLMES:** A new 473-page book, *Medical Casebook of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle* by Alvin E. Rodin & Jack D. Key (\$28.50 from Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., PO Box 9542, Melbourne, FL 32901), is the first detailed study of Doyle's medical education and practice, as well as his medical writings in fiction and nonfiction. Included is a long section on doctors and medicine in the Sherlock Holmes stories, with tables of all doctors, diseases, drugs, and causes of death mentioned in the stories.

Of similar interest are two much smaller books just published by Magico Magazine, PO Box 156, New York, NY 10002. *Sherlock Holmes on Medicine and Science* is a 32-page hardbound essay by British Home Office pathologist Professor Keith Simpson, with a brief Introduction by Isaac Asimov. The trade edition is \$10.00, and a limited, numbered edition signed by Simpson and Asimov is \$25.00. Magico also offers a paperbound reprint of a 28-page booklet, *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, A*

*Medical Digression* by Maurice Campbell, with a new Introduction by Keith Simpson, priced at \$5.00.

Also of Sherlockian interest from Magico is a hardcover one-volume reprint of *Montgomery's Christmas Annals, Volumes 1-5*, with a brief Asimov Introduction, \$25.00 trade or \$40.00 in a limited, numbered edition signed by Asimov. Two 9-page booklets, *Upon the Tracing of Footprints* by Sherlock Holmes, "edited by Kelvin I. Jones," and *The Hound of the Baskervilles: Dartmoor or Herefordshire?* by Maurice Campbell, are priced at \$3.50 each postpaid, or \$3.00 each with any other order. Finally, Magico offers *Sherlock Holmes in Retirement*, five new short-short pastiches of less than 500 words each by Val Andrews, separately bound in 2½ × 3½" paper-cover minibooks. The set of five is \$6.50.

**PAPERBACK MYSTERIES:** *Putting Dell on the Map* by William H. Lyles (\$27.95, from Greenwood Press, Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881) is a companion volume to the *Dell Paperbacks* index reviewed here two issues ago. It's a

history of Dell, 1942–1982, with emphasis on the first 20 years when mysteries made up the bulk of Dell's list. There are lengthy chapters on cover artwork and the "mapbacks" which are popular with collectors, often with comments by writers whose titles were on the list. Among the book's disclosures: Dell planned an *Alfred Hitchcock Suspense Magazine* in 1950, but it never appeared.

Also of interest to fans and collectors is *Paperback Forum*, a 52-page magazine edited by Barry Kaplan, William O'Connell, and Jonathan White.

Articles in the first issue cover such topics as Avon cover artists in the 1940s, the novels of Charles Williams, an interview with the cover artist for Ballantine's new Cornell Woolrich series, and even a checklist of "SF Porn." Copies are \$3.00 each from Barry Kaplan, 490 West End Avenue, New York, NY 10024.

**BOUCHERCON GUEST:** Bill Pronzini will be Guest of Honor at Bouchercon XV in Chicago, October 26–28. And the annual awards of the Private Eye Writers of America will again be presented as part of the program. Pronzini and co-editor Marcia Muller have two new anthologies scheduled for fall: *Witches' Brew* from Macmillan, a collection of horror stories by women, and, from Morrow, an anthology of mysteries about writers and books. Pronzini and Muller are also collaborating on a novel for St. Martin's Press, *Double*, in which Nameless and Sharon McCone team

up to solve a mystery in San Diego.

**ROSS MACDONALD:** This promises to be a year of books about the life and work of the late Ross Macdonald. Just published are Matthew J. Bruccoli's brief biography *Ross Macdonald/Kenneth Millar: The Poorhouse Prince* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$14.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper) and his companion volume, *Ross Macdonald/Kenneth Millar: A Descriptive Bibliography* (University of Pittsburgh Press, \$40.00).

**MYSTERY CLASSICS:** Just out from Morrow are the first four Quill Mysterious Classics (paper, \$3.25 each), chosen by Otto Penzler: Harold Q. Masur's *Bury Me Deep*, W. R. Burnett's *The Asphalt Jungle*, Fredric Brown's *Night of the Jabberwock*, and A. A. Fair's *The Bigger They Come*.

**MAGAZINES:** Michael L. Cook's long-awaited historical guide, *Mystery, Detective and Espionage Magazines*, has just been published (Greenwood Press, \$65.00). We'll review it next time.

**COMING ATTRACTIONS:** Julian Symons' revision of *Mortal Consequences* will be published by Viking Press this fall or winter. Symons has also edited *Classic Crimes*, a mystery anthology due from Penguin Books late this year.

Due in August are a new James Bond, John Gardner's *Role of Honor* (Putnam), and a new 87th Precinct, Ed McBain's *Lightning* (Arbor House).

Frederick Forsyth's first novel in five years, *The Fourth Protocol*, is due this fall.

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# BLOODY VISIONS

by **CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

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There is an appealing zestiness to tales of long-ago espionage, perhaps *because of* rather than *in spite of* our knowledge that the designs plotted by prior generations of master spies do not imperil our world today. We can safely thrill to those past dark forces working subterraneously to shift the crust of history. Erskine Childers' pioneering spy novel, *The Riddle of the Sands*, written in 1903, has considerable antiquarian charm—as the first “modern” espionage yarn—but political impact as well: the alarm it sounded was instrumental in causing the British government to arm the unprotected coasts of England with Royal Naval bases as a barrier against a sea invasion by Germany's Kaiser. A fictional book thereby influenced the outcome of World War I. That book has now become a delightful period adventure film.

Actually, *The Riddle of the Sands* was produced in England nearly five years ago; it took all this time for a distributor to chance a general American release—for the action is less than nuclear and events unfold with the pace of a sailboat gliding across the horizon. Two Englishmen (Michael York and Simon MacCorkindale) on a sea holiday at the Frisian Islands off the north coast of Germany become suspicious of a wealthy, apparently indolent yachtsman who makes

attempts on both their lives, while nearby masses of German sailors are maneuvering on barges commandeered by the Kaiser himself. Is a secret naval attack on England being planned? Is the yachtsman—whose English is at times broken and at other times fluent, yet whose daughter is pretty—actually some sort of double agent?

Though the questions have a familiar ring by this time, this new film excavating an old plot treats them as if they were entirely fresh and of terrible consequence. It does so winningly. *The Riddle of the Sands* joins the ranks of other spy films which satisfyingly take us back to the period around World War I, including the second and most recent remake of *The 39 Steps*, much truer to the John Buchan source than was the Hitchcock version, and Greta Garbo's *Mata Hari*.

Another more recent entry in the old espionage film network is the current British multi-part series on the PBS *Mystery!* television program, *Reilly: Ace of Spies*. The cold-blooded and fearless Sidney Reilly—grimly, stunningly portrayed by Sam Neill in the dramatization—was a real-life figure, and unquestionably the most successful spy of this century, with a cold-blooded and enduring range of accomplishments. Ian Fleming based his James Bond on the man,

while very much in awe of him, calling his own creation "just a piece of nonsense I dreamed up. He's no Sidney Reilly, you know."

Reilly, who was born in Odessa and whose real name was Sigmund Rosenblum, was the son of a well-to-do family. In his youth he ran off to sea, and was conscripted into the British Secret Service by an English spy whose life he had saved in a South American jungle. He was soon embroiled in World War espionage, actually infiltrating a meeting of the German High Command chaired by the Kaiser. (Reilly represented himself as the aide of a Bavarian prince and made off with valuable military secrets.) Later he was to penetrate the Persian oil cartels, making sure that Britain was the nation to receive the Shah's oil contracts—secret negotiations which were the foundation of British Petroleum.

Resourceful and entirely ruthless, a feverish womanizer, Reilly grasped early that "the best kept secrets are those kept by the dead." The Foreign Office at first recoiled from his scandalous reputation and wished to repudiate him. (Sniffed one senior member: "I should stick to hiring *gentlemen* in the future,

and preferably *English gentlemen*.") Reilly chose a career in espionage not for love of God and country. ("You mean he's in it for the *money*? That's treason. Chaps have been shot for less.") But he thrived, shamelessly mingling with thieves and murderers, heads of state, and armament kings, and his fascinating life has made a richly detailed, absorbing television drama.

The real Sidney Reilly, who like Bond loved gambling and high living, and the only famous English spy of his time who did not come from the ranks of that nation's upper classes, disappeared into Russia in 1925. The recently reprinted book by historian Robin Bruce Lockhart (also called *Reilly: Ace of Spies*) suggests his espionage work continued into the years of Philby, Burgess, and Maclean. On another front, Erskine Childers—who wrote *The Riddle of the Sands* and to whom the British government had much cause to be grateful—became after the war an activist for Irish Home Rule. He was arrested for gun-running in 1922 and condemned to death. Before he was shot, he shook hands with each member of his firing squad.

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"Q"

# THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

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Occasionally British crime fiction that one would expect to leap the Atlantic with ease and so arrive in an American edition fails to do so. I think of a Nicholas Blake novel (*The Deadly Joker*, 1963) that never reached these shores, as well as the last Dr. Davie novel by V. C. Clinton-Baddeley (*To Study a Long Silence*, 1972), which seems scarce even in England. Sometimes an American author also has trouble getting a book over that barrier: Hillary Waugh has one (*Murder on the Terrace*, 1961), and not one of the incredibly prolific (more than 800 books!) California writer Lauran Bosworth Paine's 79 mysteries has appeared in this country.

Now we have *Words for Murder Perhaps* (Doubleday, \$11.95) by "Edward Candy" (Barbara Neville). I can't imagine why it should have taken this exceptional 1971 British novel 13 years to negotiate the Atlantic, but it did, and now it has, praise be. Setting: the extension division of a British university. Crimes: murder, each announced by applicable bits of elegiac verse from classic poets. Suspect: Rob Roberts, who's teaching a course on crime fiction, who's connected (very darkly in one instance) to the victims, whose frozen emotions are being thawed by a fetching widow in his class. Elegant prose, perceptive application

of place, people, and emotion. Now what about Candy's *Scene Changing*, 1977?

*Murder, Mr. Mosely* (Walker, \$12.95) by "John Greenwood" (John Buxton Hilton) features an inherently engaging character—a presumed dodderer who in his own way gets the job done better than anyone else. Here it's Inspector Mosely, thought by his superiors to be fit only to look into the trivialities of crime. But when Brenda Cryer is murdered, only Mosely is available. So the intuitive inspector is given the job and the assistance of Sergeant Beamish, who believes only in the scientific method, to keep him straight. Fat chance! Delightful. More, Mr. Greenwood!

Julian Symons, having concentrated for several novels on the Nineteenth Century, returns to the present in *The Name of Annabel Lee* (Viking, \$13.95). This is a powerful exploration of character and emotion. Dudley Potter fled the collapse of relationships in England and came to New York to teach at a minor college. There in lonely bachelorhood he was easy pickings for Annabel Lee, a passing sometimes actress who stayed a bit, enslaving Dudley, then flitted on. He pursues her back to England, where old wounds are reopened, where a corpse lies on Annabel's trail, and in the end Dudley proves more in-

sightful, tougher than we had expected. Tidy and effective.

An unusually fine espionage debut—this is *Wyatt* by David Gethin (St. Martin's, \$12.95). Sir Philip Moresby, long head of Britain's special services, is arrested, accused of treason, and interrogated endlessly. He has one friend—the agile and resourceful Wyatt—who believes him innocent, who has murder on his doorstep to draw him into the fray. Wyatt starts pulling on the threads to see whose bloody Soviet-controlled hands might be at the other end. Quality work; and a sequel will soon be along.

Jack S. Scott departs from his series about Inspector Roshier to deliver *Corporal Smithers, Deceased* (St. Martin's, \$10.95), a captivating comedy of military character and crime. Focus is on Company Sergeant Major Ackroyd and Wellington Barracks, somewhere in England. One of Ackroyd's men—Smithers—commits suicide. Thus the verdict, but Smithers' mother, arriving and staying on the scene, disbelieves. Because of her, Ackroyd—magnificently captured by the author—begins to sense his loneliness, to discover feelings long forgotten. Then he, too, begins to wonder why everyone's stonewalling the Smithers death.

*True Detective* (St. Martin's, \$14.95) is Max Allan Collins' strongest novel to date, an in-

formed and suspenseful interworking of fact and fiction set in the Chicago of 1932–33. This is the city of Mayor Cermack and Eliot Ness, a city whose political and economic institutions are gangster-controlled. A city largely ignoring Prohibition and readying for the World's Fair. A city in which to be a relatively honest cop like Nate Heller is not very safe since everyone else is on the take and murder is a way of life. This is Nate's story—how he quits the police and turns private detective when his elastic standard is overstretched, how he works with Ness and Cermack, with Frank Nitti, the jailed Al Capone's successor, with George Raft and boxer Barney Ross and Walter Winchell, even F.D.R. Complex and fascinating.

The motivation of the protagonist is initially hard to swallow, but otherwise *Coast Highway 1* by Elizabeth C. Ward (Walker, \$12.95) is a fine novel—absorbing, poetic, tense, satisfying. Jake Martin, professor at a California university, barely notices a girl in one of his classes—until she's murdered outside his house and he's the primary suspect. He flees, backtracking her trail up and down the Pacific coast, surviving attempts on his life, finding more corpses, adding formidably to the list of charges for which the police want him. What is so important, and to whom, that it should be worth all this blood?

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“Q”

# DETECTIVERSE

## *STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS*

by *PHYLLIS WHITE*

The body's in the den; the gun is not.  
No one was seen to leave after the shot.  
The windows are all shut; the door's a stout one—  
A true Locked Room, no house should be without one.  
The Dying Message can be made to point  
At every single suspect in the joint.  
Oh, tell it not in Askalon or Gath—  
The sleuth is moving down a Garden Path.  
To prop up the suspense, a useful crutch  
Is killing off the one who Knew Too Much.  
Meanwhile, the interlocking alibiers  
May speak the truth or be a pair of liars.  
When all conflicting clues have been collected,  
Let's hear it for the Person Least Suspected.

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## DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

*EQMM "first story" author #612, Edith Green, is "a mother, student, nurse, and writer, not necessarily in that order. Actually, I am a writer who makes her living at nursing but would rather be a nurse who makes her living at writing."*

*This story, her first published fiction, along with "first story" #613 which follows, is the result of a course in Mystery Writing both authors elected to take at the 12th International Women's Writing Guild Conference and Retreat at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, last summer. More about this on page 76...*

### THE SAME CLOTH

**by EDITH GREEN**

<sup>66</sup>**D**ateline, Utica, N.Y.

Prominent attorney Charles Bradford, 46, died today in a local hospital due to stab wounds received on Friday in his office on Genesee Street. Police have several clues to his assailant but no arrests have been made.

Bradford figured prominently in a federal investigation of narcotics distribution in the area.

He leaves his wife, the former Natalie Wollrath, and a sister, Marsha Bradford."

"I'm glad you convinced me to come here, after all, Marsha," Natalie said. "Saratoga is lovely."

"Well, it was best for you to get away for a while and try to relax."

Natalie and Marsha Bradford were sitting at the hotel dining table, finishing their dinner. The two women could have been taken for sisters. Both were in their mid-forties and both were the same size. But that was the only thing they had in common. They couldn't

© 1984 by Edith Green.

have been more unlike in temperament or personality or in the way they dressed. Marsha was dedicated to comfort—shirts and slacks and sandals. Natalie adored frills and high heels.

Marsha shuddered as Natalie stuffed lobster into her mouth. I don't know why she can't learn to eat properly, she thought. After all those years married to Charlie, you'd think she would have learned some social graces.

"I don't know about going to the baths, though." Natalie swiped away some of the butter on her chin. "Floating around in a tub full of champagne—I only came here to feel safer—and maybe win some money at the races."

"It's not champagne, Natalie," Marsha explained patiently. "It only feels like champagne. It's really mineral water. Afterward you feel invigorated and wonderful. Tell you what. I'll treat you to one. If you don't like it, you haven't lost anything. And heaven knows you'll be perfectly safe in the baths."

The air was delightfully cool the next morning as the two women drove through the park to the baths. The building, shaped like a brick U, was once a hospital for war veterans but now it housed the mineral baths famous for their healing powers. Tall columns reminiscent of doric architecture graced the entryway.

The reception area, although plain, had an understated elegance. The walls were covered with assorted maps of the area. Marsha paid for their tickets and she and Natalie walked down the hall and turned right to the private rooms for women bathers. The rooms for men were on the opposite side.

A slightly built young woman came toward them and introduced herself.

"I'm Yvonne. Let me explain the procedure. While you disrobe in your private rooms, I'll begin running the water. Wait and let me help you into the tubs—they're very deep. The water will be about ninety-five degrees, and because of the effervescent quality it will make your body buoyant. After twenty minutes, I'll return and help you out, wrap you in a warmed sheet, and you're free to rest on the cot in the room for another thirty minutes if you like. If you need me, flick the call switch on the wall. A light will come on in the hallway and I'll be right here."

Telling Natalie she would be back, she led Marsha into a small room about twelve feet square. Against the wall to the left of the door was a small cot covered with a clean sheet. Against the opposite

wall was the tub. Marsha undressed and wrapped herself in a sheet as Yvonne ran the water.

As she sat waiting for the tub to fill, Marsha inspected the room more carefully. Next to the cot was a small table, on which she had put her clothes. In the outside wall between the cot and the tub was a window, open but with a shade discreetly pulled down. White tiles lined the walls two-thirds of the way up and the floor was covered with black-and-white tiles.

"Step in carefully," Yvonne said as she helped Marsha in. "The bottom of the tub is at a lower level than the floor." Marsha gagged at the smell of the sulphur.

"Relax," Yvonne told her. "You'll soon get used to it."

The warm water bubbled around her and in a few minutes the smell had disappeared. Untensing in the warm water, she let herself think of Charlie, her only brother, dead. It was so hard to believe. And not any children to leave behind. That was Natalie's fault. She was so childish and so vain—afraid she'd ruin her figure. What on earth had Charlie seen in her? Marsha let her mind flow back, remembering the first time Charlie had brought Natalie—an orphan—home to meet her. Since their own parents were dead, introducing his intended bride to the family meant introducing her to Marsha, his big sister by one year. Marsha, he'd told Natalie, was the one who had encouraged him to go to law school—she had always been there when he had a problem.

Yes, and she had worked nine to five every damned day of her life in that stupid office while Natalie—lazy, sloppy Natalie—got to spend all of Charlie's money. And now that Charlie was gone, all the money was going to Natalie—whose days consisted of sleeping until noon, of facials, of exercise classes, and of sponging off others. Stingy, spoiled, selfish Natalie.

In twenty minutes, Yvonne reappeared, helped Marsha out of the tub, wrapped her in a warmed sheet, and led her to the cot, where she promptly fell asleep for the full thirty minutes allowed.

"Now be honest, Natalie—don't you feel absolutely marvelous?" Marsha said.

They were on their way back to the hotel.

"Oh, yes! I feel wonderful! I want to go back every morning we're here!"

They had decided to try their luck at the race track that afternoon,

along with the thousands of others who go to Saratoga in August to bet the horses.

The track was on the edge of town and beautiful, the horses a study in motion as they pranced about, waiting for their turn at the starting gate, the crowd colorful and excited.

But: "I haven't won a thing all afternoon," Natalie wailed after a few hours. "I should have stayed at the hotel and slept."

"Slept? All you ever do is sleep, Natalie. Besides, you're so stingy with your bets, even if one of your horses comes in, you won't win enough to feel good about."

They were leaving the track with the rest of the crowd when Marsha noticed two men staring intently at the people going through the gate. The heavier of the two, in a dark-brown three-piece suit, was lighting a cigar. His companion was slight and dressed casually in slacks and a sport shirt. The men's eyes were dark and cold. Natalie followed her gaze and hurried her sister-in-law toward the parking area.

"Did you see those men? Oh, Marsha, I'm scared. I knew they'd find me. They think I know something because of what Charlie was doing, but I don't!" Inside the car, she said, "Let's leave tomorrow instead of the end of the week. If they've followed me, what's the use of kidding myself I'm safe here?"

"Natalie, you don't know for sure that they were looking for you. Just relax and try not to think about them. If you go back home, you'll still worry. Take your mind off those men. Let's go to a polo match this evening after dinner. There's a field not far from the hotel. I've never seen a game, have you?"

Natalie hadn't.

They found seats in the bleachers, noting that many people had brought blankets and picnics.

"I don't understand a thing about this sport," said Marsha as she leaned forward to get a better view. The horses topped by riders in bright colors raced back and forth, throwing clods of turf as they ran.

Natalie studied the spectators. Her face went white and she gripped Marsha's shoulder. The two men they'd noticed at the race track earlier, still wearing the same clothing, were standing near the rear of the bleachers, patiently searching the crowds. Marsha

followed Natalie's gaze and looked back at the players. "I see them. Let's go—but casually, Natalie, as if we're going for refreshments."

Five minutes later they were driving away.

"Are they following us?"

Marsha glanced in her rearview mirror and said, "No, I don't think they spotted us."

By the following morning she had convinced Natalie to stay at least one more day and to make another trip to the baths. "It will be just the thing to help us both relax," she said.

When they arrived, she asked Yvonne if they could have adjoining rooms since Mrs. Bradford wasn't feeling well. "I'd like to be in the next room to her if that's all right."

"No problem," the attendant answered, "these two adjacent rooms are free."

Marsha stood back and let Yvonne lead the passive and pathetic-faced Natalie into the first of the two rooms.

After Marsha's twenty minutes were up, Yvonne helped her out of the bath, wrapped her in the warmed sheet, and left her on the cot, absolutely exhausted.

She had no sooner left the room when she came hurrying back, her face flushed, her eyes wide with fright.

"Miss Bradford! Something terrible! Mrs. Bradford, there's something wrong with her—"

Marsha clutched the sheet around her and ran with Yvonne into the next room where Natalie was lying prone in the tub, her head underwater. There was a strange, bloated look to her body. Marsha turned away, sickened by the sight.

The manager of the baths was summoned and took her aside and made her a cup of tea while they waited for the police to arrive.

"Miss Bradford? I'm John Sanders, detective with the Saratoga Springs Police Department. I'm sorry to have to ask you questions at a time like this but I must."

"I understand."

"Please tell me everything about your trip to Saratoga."

Marsha related the whole story, including Natalie's despondency after Charlie's murder, the men they'd seen at the race track and the polo field the day before, and the two women's attraction to the baths.

"When we were here yesterday, Natalie loved it—she said she

wanted to come here every day. If we hadn't come today, she'd still be alive." Marsha began to sob.

The detective told her to get dressed while he talked with Yvonne and checked with the police photographers.

A half hour later, Natalie was taken away and he invited Marsha into the room where she had died. "Miss Bradford, will you look around this room and tell me if you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

Marsha looked. "My sister-in-law's clothes have been taken away. There's water on the floor—" She shrugged.

"Look at the window, Miss Bradford. The shade is pulled all the way up instead of down, which is the usual position. Yvonne says it was down when she left Mrs. Bradford in the tub."

"Yes, now that you mention it, it does seem strange that it's up. Mine was down. Would Natalie have pulled up the shade when she was taking a bath?"

Detective Sanders walked to the window and, as if noticing it for the first time, picked up a speck of brown cloth stuck on the sill. He looked at it thoughtfully.

"Miss Bradford, will you be at the hotel?"

"Yes. Until arrangements can be made to bring Natalie home."

"Don't leave without notifying me," he said. "And let me know if I can be of any assistance. I'm very sorry."

The phone woke her later in the afternoon.

"Detective Sanders, Miss Bradford. May I come up?"

Marsha hesitated, then said, "Certainly."

A few minutes later, John Sanders was sitting in the stuffed chair in the room Marsha had shared with Natalie.

"Miss Bradford, would you mind if I looked at the clothing you were wearing this morning?"

"My clothing? No, I don't mind. But why?"

"It's important."

She rummaged around in her suitcase and pulled out the dark-brown slacks and print shirt she had worn earlier.

Sanders examined them. "How did you get this tear?" He held out her slacks and pointed to a rip in the leg, at the knee.

"I don't know, I suppose it caught on something. I've worn them most of the time we've been here. Out at Yaddo we were climbing—"

He interrupted. "I'll tell you how I think you got this tear, Miss

Bradford. I think you got it on your way to or from murdering your sister-in-law."

"That's a terrible accusation! I was in the bath next to hers when Natalie was drowned! Why would I want to kill my own brother's wife?"

"As to that, I can only guess. Your brother was murdered not too long ago and, as I understand it from the executor of his estate, any money he had was to go to his widow. With her gone and no children or relatives of her own, the will leaves everything to you.

"As to how you killed her, my guess is that while everyone thought you were relaxing in your bath, you climbed out your window and into the window of Natalie's room, catching her off guard and simply drowning her. *That's* how you got the tear in your slacks, Miss Bradford, and *that's* why the shade in her window was up. You remembered to draw yours but forgot to draw hers after you. We've already taken fingerprints from the shade and I think that fragment of cloth caught on the window ledge will match these slacks. You're welcome to call your attorney if you like." He took a card from his pocket and was about to read it to her when she said,

"Those men who were following us—they were both wearing brown!"

Sanders' eyes did something humorous. "Two men in brown. Was one of them wearing a three-piece suit?" Marsha nodded. "Smoking a cigar?"

Marsha stared.

"F.B.I.," he told her, "assigned to the area to track down your brother's murderers. I assume you had no part in *that*."

"You assume right! I loved my brother!"

"I'm glad somebody did," he said, what had been humorous in his eyes turning off. "I'm glad somebody's *left* who did. He was a bandit—a disgrace to his profession. He pretended to prosecute drug dealers, but no one was deeper into the rotten business in this part of the state than he was.

"Money, Miss Bradford. We have witnesses who have testified he'd do anything for it. How about you?"

"Q"

## DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

*Herewith the second of the two detective stories that grew out of the IWWG writing conference at Saratoga Springs last July. The Guild, "an alliance and network of women connected to the written word," was founded by Hannelore Hahn, its executive director. This year's conference is scheduled for July 27th through August 3rd at Saratoga, with a wide variety of workshops available to those who attend. For further information, write to Hannelore Hahn, Box 810, Gracie Station, New York, NY 10028.*

*Lee Barwood is thirty-one and married—no children, but five dogs. She has an overwhelming interest in the supernatural (though this story contains no element of the supernatural) and was nominated last year for a Balrog award for her macabre poetry: "I love details and Sherlock Holmes and collect superstitions and useless fragments of information the way other people collect matchbook covers."*

*Lee's alert curiosity for details has provided her—and us—with an M.O. and a dying message that are both new to us. . .*

## BY THE BOOK

by **LEE BARWOOD**

**T**he exam will be next Thursday, one week from tonight. Make sure you've gone over the entire last half of the book." Dr. Lambert scribbled notes on the blackboard, large moist patches on the back of his shirt showing darkly in the bright lights. The heat wave had been long and vicious, and even at this late hour the air hadn't cooled enough to provide relief in the stuffy classroom on the antiquated campus.

"In the meantime, read these three books for Wednesday. There will be a quiz—and I want no one unprepared."

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A groan went up and he turned to survey the room. "Anyone who is unprepared on Wednesday will not pass the quiz. Anyone who does not pass the quiz will not pass the exam—and anyone who does not pass the exam will not pass the course. *Anyone.*" He glowered around the room. "That includes you, Drake," he said to a tall young man in the back row.

John Drake smiled and scrawled the titles from the blackboard into his notebook—Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Of Mice and Men*. One would never have guessed from his casual insolence that he was struggling with dread at the thought of the exam, but he was on the verge of losing the only thing that meant anything to him—his young wife. He had been heavily into drugs, losing his job and not really caring, until Sherry told him that unless he straightened out she'd leave him. Proof of his reform would be the diploma he would have in January if he could make it through another semester. But then he had to end up in Lambert's class. And she'd go this time—he knew she would.

Heads studiously bent, the class copied feverishly. Marian Stein looked up from her notebook at Lambert, panic in her eyes. Although she had worked hard all session, she had not done well in his class—and turning down his advances hadn't helped. Marian was on scholarship, but her grade average was dangerously low. She had a dead-end, exhausting job on an assembly line during the day and was having difficulty keeping up with the whirlwind literary comprehensive it was Lambert's sadistic pleasure to give during the second half of the summer session. College had been her dream come true, the scholarship a magic carpet—until she had drawn Lambert's class. It made no difference to him that his students were, by and large, working people with little time to spend on hot summer nights wading through the average of two thousand pages of reading he assigned during the six-week summer session. If she failed this course she would lose her scholarship.

Lambert smiled coldly back at her. Beneath his smoky grey eyes and his face that looked cut from Italian marble, there was a cavity where no heart seemed to beat.

No human heart, anyway, thought Emily Gray, who was in a position to know. She'd taken advantage of his reported fondness for leggy young brunettes and entered his bed early in the summer in preparation for the course. He seemed to appreciate her talents, even if they weren't in Fiction and Its Forms, and while she enjoyed the feeling of superiority it gave her to know that she was safe, she had

failed to reach beneath the cold shell to find the man beneath. She was disgusted with herself for it, because she knew that every term Lambert found himself a new bed partner, and their relationship was probably only a matter of time.

Lambert had extended the telescoping pointer he carried in his breast pocket and was about to review the notes on the far side of the board when he noticed that Emily's attention was on a complicated knitting pattern she'd slipped from the knitting bag she carried with her everywhere. She managed a craft boutique, made expensive handmade sweaters to order, and complained constantly that she never had enough time to work on them.

The pointer cracked like a whip on the desk-arm of her chair and she dropped the pattern.

"You are not exempt, young lady, from the work this class has been assigned," Lambert told her in a dangerously quiet voice.

Grumbling preceded and followed every one of Lambert's classes. It was a subdued and frustrated group that left the classroom in the professor's wake and an equally frustrated group that met the following Wednesday.

"Where the hell is he?" complained Rick Thomas, dropping his books with a thud and throwing his suit jacket disgustedly over the back of the chair. He smoothed back his unruly graying hair and sat wearily. He was taking the course to finish up his degree before the sheepskin paranoia raging in his company caught up with him.

"Did you get all the reading done?" Hettie Stark asked him nervously. Hettie was a day student trying to finish a year early. She'd been offered an opportunity to go on a dig in the Middle East and needed the credits.

"Hell, no," said Rick. "I only waded through one. I had to work all weekend on a special promotion and I didn't have five minutes to myself any night all week—problems with the kids."

Marian Stein arrived, panting and anxious about being late, but when they told her Lambert hadn't yet showed up she sank into a chair and caught her breath.

Ten minutes later, when Lambert still hadn't shown, Wynne Crane murmured, "I wish he'd have the decency to be on time for his own quiz." She turned to count heads. Six of the seven in the class were present. Wynne scheduled her courses for times when her husband, a police officer, wasn't home. Dave preferred night duty

because it gave him more hours with their kids, and since they all enjoyed doing things together, night courses were ideal for her.

"Emily's missing," John pointed out.

"Maybe she's too depressed to come," Hettie said.

"What do you mean?" Marian Stein wanted to know.

"Lambert's given her her walking papers. She was pretty broken up about it when she told me last Friday night."

There were murmurs of sympathy, but most of them couldn't understand how Emily had let herself become involved with the man in the first place.

"Oh, where the hell is he?" John demanded impatiently. He got up and wandered to the blackboard. "I've got a mind to write him a message. Tell him where to go."

"You'll just get yourself into trouble," Marian warned him. She had known John for a long time and knew about Sherry's ultimatum.

"I guess I don't have any choice," said John, "since there isn't any chalk."

"Maybe Lambert's gone to get some," Rick suggested. "Lord knows the man cannot function without chalk."

"True," John said. He continued to pace. He stopped at the storage closet. "Maybe there's some chalk in here." He opened the door and flipped on the light. "Oh, my God."

"What's wrong?" Wynne asked, going to the open doorway.

Lambert was sprawled in a pool of blood. His outstretched right hand was closed on a copy of *The Pearl*. The other two Steinbeck books he had assigned lay nearby. His telescopic pointer protruded from his chest.

Wynne fell on her knees beside the body. "He's still warm," she said. "Somebody go call Security!"

"Right," Rick said and hurried from the room.

A few minutes later, Emily Gray arrived, out of breath and flustered—not unusual, Lambert's attitude toward latecomers being what it was. What was unusual was that she was without her knitting bag—a last-ditch effort to win Lambert back? When she saw the others gathered at the closet, she joined them inquisitively, put her hand to her mouth in horror, and began to weep. Hettie put an arm around her shoulders and led her away to a chair.

Wynne stood studying Lambert. She was sure he was dead. Dave had told her enough about his work so that the sight of the body didn't bother her. But something did. She frowned and stared at Lambert's right hand outstretched and closed around the book. The

pointer protruded about three inches from the glistening red chest-wound and there was blood on his lips. There was blood on the floor, too—a lot of blood, she thought, for such a small wound. The wound wasn't arterial. Something was definitely wrong.

And then she realized what it was.

Rick arrived with the police and campus security. He told the others a crowd had begun to gather at the normally deserted entrance to Creighton Hall. Informal questioning began in several of the empty classrooms as the police tried to determine who on the scene had seen or heard anything that might help them.

When it was Wynne's turn to be interrogated, it was by Nick Belmont, a friend of hers and Dave's since before their marriage.

"I know who did it, Nick," she said.

"Oh, boy." Nick had never been sure about Wynne. She'd always been a know-it-all, quick to take charge.

"Nick, I've been in this man's class all session. Out of seven of us, at least three had a motive. But I know who did it. I do. The autopsy will bear me out, I'm sure of it."

"Do you think you could give me a little bit of evidence?" the policeman asked.

Wynne was glad to oblige. "Lambert didn't die immediately—his hand is closed around one of three books he obviously dropped when he was attacked. Why did he grasp *that* book? Why not *Of Mice and Men*? Who not *The Grapes of Wrath*? He was trying to tell us something.

"All the books are by John Steinbeck, so he could have grabbed any one of them to tell us that the murderer was John Drake here or Marian Stein. But the book in his hand is *The Pearl*. To me, that indicates Emily Gray. She was sleeping with Lambert for a passing grade. She might have been all right if she'd paid attention in class but she blew it and in front of us all, last time we met, he warned her quite dramatically that she wasn't above flunking. He had a reputation to maintain on campus and he wasn't about to let her make him look soft. Next day he told her things were off between them. It was all just too much for her. She came to class early tonight to convince him otherwise but he'd made up his mind. She stabbed him with the handiest weapon she had—one of her knitting needles. She always had her knitting with her.

"Having done it, she realized it would be obvious he had been stabbed with a knitting needle, so after he fell she pulled it out and

looked around for something else that could be mistaken for the murder weapon. Lambert's pointer was in his pocket. She took it out, opened it, and slid it into the slightly larger wound made by the knitting needle."

Wynne shut her eyes sadly. "I think the medical examiner will agree the wound is too deep to have been caused by a pointer that folds on impact, and that death, which was not immediate, occurred after the original weapon was withdrawn, allowing the wound to bleed freely and the lung to fill with blood—hence the blood on his lips. But he had time enough to grab the book to leave us a clue to his killer. He didn't mean John, or Stein. He meant *pærl*, a variation on *purl*—to indicate Emily's incessant knitting. It drove him mad."

"You said she had her knitting with her all the time. She doesn't have it with her now."

"I know," Wynne said. "That's what really convinced me."

"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### MISOGYNIST MYSTERIES

by BERNARD BLICKSILVER

A cranky old writer named Slade  
At mysteries missed making the grade—  
Though his prose style was lean,  
His heroes sexy and mean,  
His killer was always the maid.

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a **NEW** short story by

**HENRY SLESAR**

*"It's not a toy," Tom told his wife. "It's a computer, a microprocessor on wheels. It's the future, honey."*

*Jasmine looked sharply at her husband, Harry—Tom's friend. "Not your future, Harry."*

*Winner of two Edgar awards from the Mystery Writers of America and of an Emmy, Henry Slesar offers us here another prize-caliber fiction . . .*

## THE TIN MAN

by **HENRY SLESAR**

The last thing Harry Budner expected when he arrived at the Polanski house was that Destiny would answer the doorbell. But there it was, whirring and clicking and waving its metallic arm, while an equally metallic voice greeted Mr. and Mrs. Budner with a phoneme-speech-synthesized:

*"Hello."*

Jasmine gave her characteristic cry of surprise, not unlike the yelp of a stepped-on poodle. Harry was too green to say anything. It wasn't the green of syncope; it was the color of envy. He knew that Tom, a computer hacker like himself, had been talking about robotics for months. But he hadn't realized that he had actually brought one into electronic life.

Fleur Polanski rushed Jasmine off to the powder room to calm her down and a grinning Tom pushed a Scotch into Harry's hand and proudly patted the robot's chassis. "Now you know what I've been doing down in the basement for the past two months. Building Rex here. Well, say something! At least say hello!"

"Hello," Harry said.

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"Hello, dummy," Rex said, and Tom roared. "How about that? It *hears* you, Harry! It's got a sound sensor, picks up ambient sound all the way to 5000 Hertz. And it's got *eyes*, see? Right here! But the important thing is, you can program this baby to *respond*. Wait—let me show you." He seized a hand-held remote-control pendant and began to manipulate its switches. Rex began a stately circuit of the living room on its three wheels, bumping into the wing chair once but neatly cornering around the coffee table. "It's got a hand, too, but I haven't figured it out yet. It's still in the basement; later you and me can go down there and look it over."

By now the ladies had returned, and the look in Jasmine's eyes had changed from shock to apprehension. In contrast, Fleur was lighthearted. "Remember what you promised," she told her husband. "You said you'd shut that damned thing off until after dinner. Then you and Harry can go downstairs and play with your new toy."

"Not a toy," Tom said flatly. "It's a computer, Fleur, a microprocessor on wheels. It's the *future*, honey."

Jasmine looked sharply at Harry. His own sensors told him what she was thinking: "Not *your* future, Harry."

True to his word, Tom put Rex's power-switch to OFF and the robot remained in the living room as lifeless as a fire hydrant. But the only fire was in Harry's eyes. Even Jasmine's frigid glances across the table didn't diminish their heat.

"It's a good thing Tom didn't put a hand on the little monster," Fleur said, handing out the spinach quiche, "or he'd have Rex serving dinner right now."

"Robots will do everything soon," Tom chuckled. "I've already warned Fleur, my next one is going to be named Raquel."

After dinner, the sexes split along pre-Women's Lib lines. Wives to the kitchen, husbands to the basement.

"All right," Fleur sighed. "I can see you're worried. Harry's still not working, is he?"

Jasmine bit fiercely into the pecan pie she had refused at the dinner table.

"Harry is never going to 'work.' Harry's stopped even *looking* for work. He's thirty-eight years old, and retired."

It wasn't strictly true. Harry Budner hadn't dropped out of the labor force. He had simply been seduced by the electronic age. With all the marvels out there, all the glowing, beeping, spinning, flashing miracles luring him to the electronic stores, the computer shops, the magazine stands and trade shows, there was simply no time left for

his own non-electronic "trade." He was a clothing salesman. Jasmine met him when she brought her ex-husband into the store. The husband had grown portly since their marriage five years before, and needed a new wardrobe. Harry was impressed by the fact that she paid for it. Jasmine was impressed by Harry, who looked much better than her husband did in the three-way mirror.

The divorce hadn't taken long. The portly husband had left quietly, with a new bulge in his suit. It was money. Jasmine didn't tell Harry what she did to smooth the path of their union. She was determined not to have the numbers in her bank account numbered among her charms. But to be painfully honest—and her friends often were—Jasmine's charms were limited. Not that Harry married her only for her money. He also liked her smile. Unfortunately, Jasmine stopped smiling the day she realized that Harry was more interested in programming his computer than in his marriage.

When they left the Polanskis', the trouble began the moment they were homeward-bound.

"A dope like Tom Polanski," he said, "building his own robot! It was from a kit, of course, but just the same—"

"Fleur was right," Jasmine said. "It's a toy. Nothing but an expensive toy."

"I could build a better one," Harry said dreamily. "I could build a bigger mainframe and motherboard. I could install an M68000 microprocessor! It's only got 4K RAM. I could make it sixteen, maybe thirty-two. Think what it could do with 32K!" Jasmine, who knew the number only as her waist size, snorted.

"Put it out of your head, Harry. You're not spending *my* money on a damned walking Erector set."

Lately, Jasmine had taken to sharp reminders of their financial realities, but Harry was too deep in his dream to care. In their bedroom, he yanked off his socks and said:

"Tom didn't program it right. That's why it bumped into the chair. I could make the darned thing do a ballet!"

"That's all we need around here," Jasmine said sourly. "A tin can that does entrechats."

"It can do more than that. Robots are useful. They're all over industry these days, whole plants are run by them—"

"And what good are they in a house? If you ask me, it's nothing but a machine that says 'hello.'"

"Tom's robot can pick up stuff. The arm rotates two hundred and

fifty degrees, the hand pivots three hundred and fifty—it actually grasps things.”

“Well, there’s something *you* haven’t grasped,” she said. “I’m sick and tired of the way we’re living, Harry. You haven’t worked in a year, but you haven’t stopped spending money.” She climbed under the sheets and the bed sagged, tilting him toward her. “But don’t worry,” Jasmine said. “If you want to play with dolls, I’m going to give you the chance. I bought The Male Mart.”

An icy hand pivoted 350 degrees around Harry’s heart.

“You did what?”

“I bought The Male Mart,” his wife said smugly. “You can play with all the dolls in the window. Well, the least you can do is thank me. Even that damned robot could say thanks.”

Harry was too stricken to say anything. The Male Mart was a small, tacky clothing shop in the suburban town where the Budners had their country home. It was probably the only men’s shop in the Eastern United States that still sold leisure suits. It had been up for sale for five years, and Jasmine had joked about buying it whenever she wanted to make her husband squirm.

“Congratulations, Harry,” she said, “you finally got a job. Maybe you’ll be able to afford to buy one of those tin cans on wheels. You can program it to be a stock clerk. Or even to measure the customers.” She giggled. “No, maybe you better not. It might kill somebody.”

Harry Budner would remember that conversation for the rest of his life. Especially the last four words.

For the next three months, Harry didn’t give much thought to robotics. He was too busy making mistakes. He changed out all the stock at The Male Mart, putting in a line of dress suits, slacks, and accessories, just as summer began and everyone in town wanted what the label-makers called “activewear.” He quickly ordered athletic pants and sweatshirts, which arrived when the first leaves of autumn began turning. When the long winter evenings began, he contented himself by ordering books with titles like: *How To Build a Home Robot*, *Practical Robotics*, *The VOR Handbook: Volitionally Operating Robots*.

Despite its lack of profitability, The Male Mart was a success in that it made Jasmine happy. She was pleased that Harry was “working,” even if he spent most of his time reading in the conducive quiet of the shop. When Harry asked her for “business loans” to buy merchandise, she agreed, even if she suspected that the merchandise

Harry ordered came from the pages of a publication called *Home Robotics*.

The Male Mart had another advantage. It had its own basement. Within a few weeks, it became the birthplace of the robot Harry christened "Macduff."

Later, Harry would have another name for it, a name he would whisper to it only in moments of surest secrecy.

It wasn't long before Harry realized the complexity of what he was attempting. He couldn't design the mainframe without knowing how large and heavy a battery he required. He couldn't choose the battery until he knew how much power the motors would consume. Finally, Harry decided that the only solution was to make Mac big enough to absorb any errors in judgment.

The robot he designed was five feet, six inches tall.

Jasmine was five-four.

The problem of mainframe material was solved easily enough. Wood was too cumbersome. Steel was not only heavy but it picked up metallic fields that might interfere with the sensors. Luckily, there was a hardware supermarket in the next town that sold aluminum extrusions. The simple boxy design Harry chose was soon a reality. It was only a shell, but its presence in the basement gave Harry a sense of accomplishment—almost companionship.

The first time Jasmine realized what Harry was doing, she didn't complain. She did something worse. She laughed.

"You really think you can build one of those things?"

"Sure I can. It's just a question of time and money."

"You can forget about the money," Jasmine said. "As for time—I'll give you six weeks."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't want you wasting your time playing with tinkertoys when you should be taking care of the customers—if you ever get any. Six weeks, Harry! That's all!"

That night, after putting the *Closed* sign on the front door (a superfluous gesture), Harry brought a bottle of bourbon into the cellar and filled two oversized paper cups. He put one in front of Macduff and lifted the other in a toast.

"Six weeks," he said. "We can do it, Mac. In six weeks, you'll be able to *lift* that cup."

But since Macduff had no arms, to say nothing of any lifting mechanism, the bourbon remained untouched. Thoughtfully, Harry

finished it for him. When he reached home, Jasmine took one look at his lopsided grin, smelled his breath, and banished him from the dining room.

Late that night, he sneaked barefoot into the kitchen and attacked the refrigerator. The selection was meager, the combinations exotic. After yogurt, anchovy paste, and pork tongue, his night was filled with bizarre dreams. In one of them, the Tin Man begged him for a heart. He remembered thinking that it was the one mechanism he had no intention of providing.

The next morning, Harry did something he had hesitated to do before. He advertised for a part-time assistant, someone to take care of the store while he took care of the construction of the robot. He knew it would reduce his already overstretched allowance, but Jasmine's six-week deadline made it mandatory.

The pay scale was low, so Harry wasn't surprised when the first applicant was a senior from the local high school. What did surprise him was what modern nutrition could do for a seventeen-year-old. Bunny Teicher had absolutely no credentials when she presented herself at The Mart. Her only qualification for the job was that she was accustomed to dealing with the public. By this she meant she was a cheerleader. Harry could immediately appreciate how successfully Bunny led those cheers.

It has to be admitted that Bunny's presence in the store didn't really expedite Harry's robot project. But it did make it more fun. Bunny, curious about the mystery of Harry's frequent disappearances into the basement, soon learned about the robot. And in contrast to Jasmine's sneering laugh, Bunny expressed nothing but wide-eyed delight.

"But it's *adorable*," she said. "It's just like *Star Wars*! I just love that bod!"

Harry basked in her childlike enthusiasm, especially since there was nothing childlike about Bunny's own bod. And since he identified so closely with Macduff, he couldn't help feeling that some of her enthusiasm was for himself.

He had Macduff's driving and steering motors in place within a week after Bunny's arrival. By working the motors in conjunction, he was able to make the robot body turn in every direction, reverse itself, spin in complete circles. He chuckled at the idea of choreographing it as a ballet dancer, or better still, he told Bunny, a cheerleader. She found *that* idea so amusing, she giggled and kissed

Harry on the forehead. He arrived home that night with a faint smear of red on his receding hairline and Jasmine asked if he had hurt himself.

"Just bumped my head in the stockroom," he said bravely.

"I thought maybe your robot friend took a poke at you," she commented. "Better be careful about that thing, Harry. It might be dangerous. Remember what happened to Frankenstein."

"Yes," he said pleasantly. "I suppose it *could* be dangerous if you aren't careful."

He intended, however, to be very careful.

By the end of the following week, Harry had designed the external response mechanism. By the third week, he realized he had been too ambitious. He had hoped to give Macduff a sophisticated TV-like optical scanning system, but both money and time were too tight, so he settled for a rectangular array of phototransistors. Macduff would be able to "see" objects in its path, but it wouldn't be able to tell the difference between, say, a floor lamp and his wife.

The acoustical sensing problem was more readily solved. Harry already had a computerized speech-recognition program for Macduff's capacious interior. It took another two weeks of trial-and-error experimentation, but Harry was able to get the robot to actually respond to simple commands, such as "Come here." The first time Bunny saw Macduff obey Harry's orders, she reacted with awe.

"Mr. Budner," she gasped, "you're a genius!"

Harry liked hearing her say that. But he was disappointed when she failed to bestow another congratulatory kiss. He had planned to stand on tiptoe for the next one.

It was after Harry installed the microprocessor that he got the kiss. It was just one day before the end of his six-week deadline. He was out of time and money, but he didn't care. He was too excited by Macduff's first solo run, the moment when Harry stood in front of the programmed robot and said:

"Hello, Macduff."

"Hello, Harry," Macduff said. It rolled up to him with a bit too much clanking of gears and extended its metal arm. The grippers closed on his hand and shook it jerkily but with manly vigor. Actually, it hurt, but Harry didn't complain.

"Oh, Mr. Budner!" said his admirer. Then Bunny not only kissed him, she threw her arms around him. It was an unusual sensation.

When Jasmine infrequently put her arms around him, it was like being embraced by a damp marble kiosk.

But in the next moment, triumph turned into tragedy.

It was Harry's own fault, he told himself later. He hadn't been able to resist telling Jasmine about his experiment in the basement of The Male Mart that afternoon. And Jasmine had decided that nothing could be sweeter than seeing him fail.

Neither Harry nor Bunny heard her enter the shop. Neither heard the basement door open. Neither realized that Macduff's performance—and theirs—was being watched by the narrow eyes of Harry's wife. Not until they heard her poodlelike yelp.

"Jasmine!" Harry gasped.

"Mrs. Budner!" Bunny squealed.

"Hello," Macduff said.

It was a sudden end to a dream, but it could have been worse. Macduff had come into existence, even if he was incomplete. Harry had planned far more extensive programming, including a "nesting" subroutine which would have enabled the robot to recharge its own battery. But Jasmine was implacable. Even though Harry swore his innocence (it was all that silly girl's fault), she laid down new rules for his existence.

1. The Male Mart basement was to be used strictly for storage.

2. Bunny was to be fired and Jasmine would hire his new assistant herself.

3. Harry's allowance was to be cut in half. The remainder would have to be supplied by his store profits. Since there were none, he would clearly stay poverty level forever.

The only concession Jasmine made concerned the robot. Yes, Harry could keep the damned thing, as long as he kept it out of sight. *And* as long as he applied himself to the men's-clothing business.

There was a large, unused closet in the TV room. It became Macduff's new home.

It was almost a month later when the incident occurred that gave Macduff his new name.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Harry was alone in the house, idly POKING and PEEKING on his home computer, when he had an overwhelming urge to work on Macduff's insides. Jasmine had gone to a NOW meeting that promised to keep her out of the house for another two hours. Emboldened, Harry brought Macduff out of its

hiding place and began to tinker. He was so engrossed, he failed to hear Jasmine's car in the driveway. By the time he realized she was at the front door, it was almost too late. Panicky, he pushed Macduff rudely back into the closet and slammed it shut, not a moment too soon.

Unfortunately, in his haste, Harry forgot to put the power switch to off. And that night, Macduff proved that it was still in good working order.

It happened while Jasmine was busy changing channels. It was Jasmine's favorite evening occupation, ever since Cable Television had arrived in their town. There were now thirty-five channels to choose from and Jasmine had become more of a TV freak than ever. She spent every evening in the TV room, well supplied with snacks, flipping channels hypnotically, feasting on the changing screens the way she feasted on smorgasbord tables.

Harry had been watching, too, nursing the one drink permitted him before dinner. But when he brought the empty glass to the kitchen, he felt the need for a second and poured himself one. Sure enough, Jasmine's sharp ears picked up the sound of clinking ice and she cried out:

"Harry! *Come here!*"

Harry didn't see the next event, but he heard it: a combination of splintered wood and poodle yelps. He hurried back into the TV room and gaped at what he saw: Macduff, with its metal arm extended lancelike, advancing on a shrieking Jasmine.

It took him a while to calm her down and explain that it was only an accidental demonstration of Macduff's abilities. "It was just obeying orders," Harry said. "It just got turned on by mistake, that's all."

"Well, from now on," Jasmine grumbled, "make sure that damned thing is *off*, or it goes *out*. Understand?"

That night, lying in the cavity of his bed, Harry thought about Macduff and his bad behavior. When he finally fell asleep, his night was dreamless. But he woke up with a dream in mind.

That morning, he told his new assistant, an elderly man who smelled vaguely of boiled milk, that he was going home for lunch. It was a fabrication. Jasmine never served him lunch at home. In fact, she wasn't even there. She was in a dress shop, looking for ever-larger sizes.

Harry went straight to the TV room and brought Macduff out of

the closet. Only he didn't call him Macduff. He stroked his smooth mainframe and whispered his new name.

"Killer."

Jasmine wasn't fooled by the flowers Harry brought home the following evening. She knew it was a crude blandishment, that there was something Harry wanted: permission to continue to perfect his Tin Man.

"All I need is another few hundred dollars," Harry said. "Just for the hand, Jasmine, that's the only thing I'm not satisfied with."

"You call that *claw* a hand?" Jasmine sniffed.

"I want to make it interchangeable. There are all kinds of fingers you can use. Magnetic fingers, clamshell fingers, shovel fingers . . ."

"What's the *good* of it, Harry? That's what I'd like to know?"

"Well," he tried to explain, "you can make a robot into a craftsman, with the right accessories. A hollow hand, for instance, with a motor tool in it—Macduff could do all kinds of grinding and carving."

"You mean that tin can could actually be put to *work*?"

"Oh, yes," Harry said dreamily. "With the right accessory, you'd be amazed how useful he could be."

"All right," Jasmine sighed. "I suppose I'll never hear the end of it if I don't. I'll give you three hundred dollars, but that's the end of it, Harry, understand? *The end.*"

He smiled as she spoke the words.

Macduff's new hand took only a few hours to install. Programming it to work exactly the way Harry wanted took another twenty-four hours. But formulating his plan for Jasmine's fatal encounter with the robot took almost a week.

The difficulty was obvious. Harry had to be absolutely certain that he wouldn't be held accountable for the "accident" Jasmine was going to have. He couldn't let it appear that he had deliberately programmed the machine to commit homicide—then the law would consider Macduff nothing more than an elaborate murder weapon.

No, it had to be as genuine an "accident" as possible—as credible, say, as an auto that slips its brakes and rolls downhill, a lawnmower gone amok, a defective toaster that electrocutes the person who sticks a fork into its innards. It had to be believable, and it had to be *her fault*.

And at last, Harry had the Plan.

The scheme had three virtues. It was simple. It was direct. And best of all, Harry would not be home when the "accident" happened.

But getting away from home was a major problem in itself. How could he justify a trip? Jasmine was sure to be suspicious of its purpose—she might think he was having a tryst with Bunny Teicher or a reasonable facsimile. There were various retail conventions he could attend, but she would never believe a sudden interest in business. No—it had to be a reason she could accept, and then possibly tolerate.

It was Tom Polanski who gave him the idea.

Jasmine didn't want to invite the Polanskis for dinner, but she owed them one, and had no choice according to the rules. But she laid down a rule of her own: Harry and Tom were forbidden to play with his robot. Tom, who was secretly jealous of Harry's accomplishment, was willing enough. But at the dinner table, he brought up the subject by saying:

"Hey, Harry! Hear about the Robot Convention in Philly?"

Harry hadn't heard, and Tom was only too happy to tell him, crowing over the fact that he was going to attend—his wife had no objections. Actually, Fleur was delighted to have him out of the house for a few days.

But that night, in their bedroom, when Harry tentatively approached the subject, Jasmine's attitude was predictable.

"Forget it! You're not going to any Tin Can Convention—just put it out of your mind!"

Harry argued, wheedled, cajoled. Eventually, he begged. Still Jasmine resisted—she hated the idea of being left alone. Their house was too isolated; anything could happen. Harry, who knew exactly what could happen, promised to be gone only one night. And on his return, he would be a new and better husband. *Please*, sweet stuff, he said. He hadn't called her sweet stuff since their honeymoon.

It was a final promise that did the trick. Harry swore he would work harder than ever in The Male Mart. He would buckle down; he would change; he would put away childish things. Jasmine assumed he meant the "childish thing" in the TV-room closet. What Jasmine didn't know was that the closet itself had changed. Now there was no latch on the inside, only the lightest of magnetic clamps. If Macduff ever decided to leave his resting place, the door would swing open at a touch. Out he would come, extending a metallic arm which now boasted a hand that could drill a hole in a steel wall, or even a damp marble kiosk . . .

If Harry's plan for ending Jasmine's life had been a computer program, it might have looked something like this.

100 SET ROBOT TIMER FOR TURN-ON 1900 HOURS  
200 PLACE CALL FROM PHILADELPHIA AT 1930 HOURS  
300 RING PHONE IN TV ROOM  
400 JASMINE PICKS UP PHONE  
500 WORD "HELLO" ACTIVATES ROBOT  
600 ROBOT LEAVES CLOSET AND ATTACKS SPEAKER  
700 ROBOT TURNS ON ELECTRIC DRILL IN HAND  
800 PROGRAM END

Like any good programmer, Harry studied the elements of his plan to determine what might go wrong. Would the timer fail? He would make sure the battery pack was fully charged before he left for Philadelphia. Would his phone call be delayed? No matter. Once Jasmine was ensconced in the TV room, she was there for the rest of the night. Would Jasmine answer the right phone? Harry would guarantee it. He would unplug the only other phone in the bedroom—Jasmine could never stoop low enough to replace it. Would her "hello" activate the robot? Harry had tested it a hundred times, without a single failure.

But the most important question was: would Jasmine find a way to escape her lumbering assassin?

The problem gnawed at Harry's mind, until he found a beautifully simple solution. One night he casually suggested that they move the TV-room phone into a small L-shaped nook away from the TV set itself: that would guarantee the speaker more privacy and not disturb anyone watching the screen. It was a practical idea that earned Jasmine's blessing. She didn't know how "practical" it was. Because once Macduff's wide metal bulk was blocking the narrow alcove, there was no escape.

But on the morning of his departure, Jasmine said something that almost aborted the plan.

"I hate being alone! You know how I hate it, Harry. So I was thinking—maybe I'll go and spend the night with Fleur."

"No!" Harry said sharply. "You can't do that! I mean—you know Fleur. She'll talk your head off all night."

"But what if there was a burglar or a prowler? You could scream your head off in this house and nobody would hear you!"

Harry knew that only too well. But he said:

"You can always use the phone. And that's another reason why

you can't leave tonight. I'm expecting an important phone call, from a big customer. You'll have to be here to take the message . . . "

She was pouting now, so Harry put his arms around her—something of a physical feat. "I'll call you around seven-thirty, sweet stuff."

Then he pecked her cheek and was off.

Under any other circumstances, Harry would have been totally absorbed by every exhibit at the Robot Show, but, as Tom Polanski noted sourly as they sat in the hotel bar, Harry seemed to be a million miles away.

"And another thing," Tom grumbled, "why do you keep looking at your watch all the time?"

"Because I have to call home," Harry said. "I promised Jasmine I'd call."

"Boy, oh boy," Tom said, shaking his head. "The way some guys let their wives treat them."

"Yes," Harry said, smiling inappropriately.

He went up to his room a short while later, leaving Tom at the bar trying to convince two giggling women that he had certain bionic parts. He tried not think about what he was he doing when he asked the operator to place the phone call.

The hotel lines were busy, so he was forced to wait.

As cool as he felt, he realized he was sweating.

The operator said: "I can connect you now."

He heard the phone ring. It rang once, twice, three times.

The beaded perspiration on his forehead began to stream down his neck.

The phone was answered.

"Hello," Jasmine said.

Harry hung up.

When Tom came upstairs an hour later, grinning and chortling, he found Harry lying on top of the bed, fully clothed and looking remarkably content. He tried to talk him into joining him at dinner with the little cuties he had met. They were both with IBM and he had built up Harry as the foremost robotics expert in the country. But Harry wasn't interested. He just wanted a quiet meal and an early bedtime.

Jasmine would have wanted it that way.

The next morning, driving up to the house, Harry wasn't surprised at the stillness.

He let himself into the house quietly and stood in the front hallway a long time, gathering the strength he knew he would soon need.

He decided to play the role even without an audience.

"Jasmine?" he called out.

There was, of course, no answer.

"Jasmine, I'm home!"

He went up to the bedroom first. The bed was still made. He replaced the phone plug in the jack and returned downstairs.

He filled his lungs with air and went into the TV room.

He closed his eyes. Opening them, he saw that there was no disorder, no blood, no mayhem, no Jasmine, and no Macduff.

"What happened here?" he gasped.

Then he knew the answer. Nothing had happened.

"But why? *Why?*" he asked the empty room.

He entered the L-shaped alcove and looked at the phone. He knew Jasmine had answered him last night. He knew she had picked it up and said the word "Hello." He knew Macduff would have been triggered into action the moment she spoke it. But why was everything just as it was when he left?

Then he realized: not everything.

There was something new in the TV room.

It was a slim grey box and there was a folded piece of paper on top of it.

Harry picked it up and read:

*"Dear Harry,"*

*"In case you get home before I do, there's milk and eggs and stuff in the kitchen. I'm over at Fleur's place. But don't worry about your phone messages. I borrowed her answering machine. Call me when you get home."*

"An answering machine," Harry said.

He switched it on and listened.

"Hello," Jasmine's voice said, loud and clear.

Harry would have cursed her vigorously, but there wasn't time. Behind him, the closet door had just opened.

"Q"

*The girl leaned forward and pointed excitedly to a road narrower than the one they were on, leading off to the left. "There," she cried. "There's the cut-off. You follow that and it'll take you right over to the next county where the station is . . ."*

## A NICE THING GOING

**by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS**

If I had been in the city, none of it would have happened, because in all likelihood I wouldn't have even thought of stopping.

That says something for me, I suppose, but the sad fact is that when there's a crowd around it's easy to rationalize that somebody else is bound to take care of a stranger's minor misfortune if you don't. As it was, though, I was about as far from the city as you can get, psychologically if not physically, driving south and east down a long stretch of asphalt two-lane that was as empty as a shelled bean—except for the beat-up sedan tipped precipitously over into the ditch running parallel to the road and the tall blonde girl waving frantically beside it. The buck, as they say, stopped right there, with no one to pass it on to. Even so, instinct dies hard and I was a good fifty feet down the road before I finally braked to a stop.

The girl came running up as I got out. "Oh, lordy, mister," she said, "am I glad to see you! I was beginning to think—" she pronounced it "thank" "—I was gonna have to spend the whole darn day stuck out here."

"What happened?" I said.

She shook her head, her conventionally pretty face a mask of puzzlement. "Don't ask me, mister," she said. "One minute I was riding along as pretty as you please and the next I was headed for the ditch and nothing to do about it. Lucky I wasn't going fast or I'd of likely ended up smashed up, too."

"Probably a blowout," I said. The girl nodded cheerful agreement. Despite the country accent and attitude, her face was as carefully made up as any I'd seen in the city, and while not fat by any means

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she was round enough in the right places to stretch the tight jeans and man-tailored shirt she wore almost to bursting.

I looked dubiously back at the wreck. "I suppose if you've got a rope or something, I could try to pull you out."

"Oh, you don't want to do that, mister. The way that old car's beat up, I probably wouldn't be able to drive it anyways, and you could pull the bumper off yours or something. What you do is just drop me off at my uncle's garage down the road here a piece and that'll do me just fine."

It occurred to me to wonder why she didn't just hike down to the garage then or at least start out for it, but I didn't push the thought. It seemed a moot point and in any case the girl seemed to take it for granted I would agree, running around the car without waiting for an answer and letting herself in.

I'd assumed with my city-bred sense of distance that the garage would be a mile or two at the most. Chatting with the girl, I wasn't really paying that much attention, but when I finally did check, the odometer had clicked off close to ten miles with no gas station or other sign of civilization in sight. I was just about to remark on it when the girl leaned forward and pointed excitedly to a road, narrower than the one we were on, leading off to the left.

"There," she cried. "There's the cut-off. You follow that and it'll take you right over to the next county where the station is."

I looked at it even more dubiously than I had the wrecked car. When I'd committed myself, I hadn't really counted on any cut-offs or going out of my way. But having gone this far there was no practical way I could refuse to go farther, and so, figuring I'd be back on my way soon, I turned obediently off onto the side road.

We had barely gone a hundred yards before the road narrowed even further and the trees lining it closed in abruptly.

"You sure this is the right road?" I said.

The girl cringed back against the car door. "Don't you hurt me," she said.

"Hurt you! Why would I want to do that? I'm trying to—hell!" Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of flashing lights coming fast up the road behind us and felt a quick start of fear and suspicion. But then a short, sharp siren blast announced them as police.

"Hell," I said again, braking hard and getting out, "just what I need."

The police car stopped close to my rear fender and two khaki-

uniformed deputy sheriffs got out and came toward me. The closer and bigger of the two pointed his gun at me. "Just freeze right there, fella."

I froze.

"Now, nice and easy, put your hands up on top of your head and back off there. Okay, that's far enough."

"Officer," I said, "this is a big mistake."

"It sure is," he agreed, "but just whose it is is we're gonna have to find out. Watch him, Fred." And as his partner covered me with his pistol, he came forward and bent over to look in through the open car door. "You okay, Bobby Jo?"

The girl nodded, tearfully.

"Just what the hell was in your mind anyway?" the deputy asked her, "gettin' in a car with a strange man like that? It was just pure luck me and Fred spotted you makin' the turn."

"I didn't want to," Bobby Jo sobbed. "But he just kept insisting."

"That's not true," I said. "She—"

The deputy moved swiftly, more swiftly than I'd have believed a man of his size could move, straightening and punching me sharply in the chest. I staggered back, stumbled, and fell.

He towered over me. "I don't know how things are where you come from, fella," he said, "but around here folks don't take kindly to grown men picking up innocent little girls and taking them down dark roads that don't go nowhere."

Little girls. Somehow I knew he wasn't just speaking figuratively, and as if sensing my thoughts he called back over his shoulder to the car. "How old are you now, Bobby Jo?"

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen," the deputy repeated, turning back to me. "Folks hear that and they're going to wonder why I didn't just shoot you down where you stood. In fact, I'm asking myself the same question right now. So if you're smart, mister, you'll just keep your old mouth shut and not do anything that might make me change my mind." With that, he holstered his pistol, then reached down to grab me by the shirt-front and haul me to my feet.

"Fred," he said over his shoulder again, "you see that Bobby Jo gets back to her mother. This—" he couldn't find a word to describe me and, after a moment's pause to let me realize it, gave up the attempt "—and I are gonna go in and see the sheriff." He put his face close to mine, still holding onto my shirt. "You're driving," he

said, "and you better watch how you move awful careful like, because you better believe I sure am gonna."

The road was too narrow for a turn, so I had to back out after the police car behind me, which was that much more difficult because of the deputy's frowning presence on my right. Once safely back on the highway, at the deputy's direction, we headed back the way I'd come.

The tipped-over car was still where it had been and I considered trying once more to explain, but a quick glance at my companion's face decided me otherwise. Two miles farther on, we came to another turnoff to the right which led back to the town itself.

It was pretty much what I'd expected: a cluster of houses around one long main street with the usual assortment of shops—including, I noted wryly, two gas stations as well as a bank, post office, and, at the far end, a squat brick building that tripled as municipal hall, courthouse, and jail.

The sheriff's office was on the ground floor behind the stairs, a small bare room lit by an unshaded overhead light and containing just enough space for a couple of desks, some chairs, and a low wood railing to separate the desks from what served, I suppose, as a reception area. A paunchy, grey-haired man with a lined, lugubrious face sat behind the desk nearest the railing. He wore a khaki uniform like my captors' but no tie, and the large insignia patch at his shoulder proclaimed him sheriff instead of deputy. A sign over the door identified him further as George Barnes.

He looked up as the deputy hustled me in. "Well, now, Earl," he said, "what you got there this time?"

"Slicker from the city," the deputy said. "Charge is rape. Attempted, anyway. Abduction of a minor. Give me time I might think of a few more."

"Look, Sheriff," I said, "this has gone far enough."

Earl's finger jabbed hard into my side just below the ribs. It hurt like hell. "I thought I told you to keep your mouth shut," he said.

"Don't worry," Barnes said equably as I tried to get my breath back, "you'll get your chance to tell your story. Right now, let's just find out who you are. Empty your pockets here on the desk."

When I hesitated, Earl nudged me again, not as hard this time but hard enough to revive memories. I put my wallet, keys, and change on the desk in front of the sheriff, then after a moment added the checkbook and pocket secretary from my inside jacket pocket.

Barnes unhesitatingly went through the wallet first. "Seventy-five in cash," he said, counting. "And what's this?" He took out the check stuck down behind the bills and unfolded it, his eyes widening as he made out the amount. "Pearson Construction Company check for sixteen hundred made out to something called Banner Associates." He looked up at me speculatively. "Which one are you," he said, "a Pearson or a Banner?"

"Does it matter?"

Earl jabbed me again, hard this time. "Sheriff asks you a question," he said, "you answer it."

"It don't matter," Barnes said. "I can see where a man in this kind of situation wouldn't want to get his company involved, and we'll find out in due time if we need to." He refolded the check, put it back in my wallet, and set the wallet aside. "What's Fred doing now—taking Bobby Jo home?"

Earl nodded.

"Why don't you just go over there, then, and see if everything's all right?"

Earl looked significantly at me.

"Don't worry," Barnes said. "He's not going to do anything foolish." He put my car keys in his pocket. "Are you, son?"

"No," I said.

Earl gave me one last glower, then turned and stalked out, leaving the gate in the railing swinging behind him.

Barnes chuckled mildly. "Real hothead, Earl is," he said. "It don't help Bobby Jo is his cousin, either."

"Look, Sheriff," I began for what seemed the eighty-ninth time.

Barnes pointed to a chair. "Why don't you just sit down?" he said.

I pulled the chair around and sat down. Barnes had picked up my wallet again and was checking over my driver's license.

"Harold Kayser," he said. "Born July 8, 1941. That'd make you how old now, Harold? Forty-two?"

I nodded.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Any kids?"

"Two girls."

Barnes clucked his tongue. "Oh, this's gonna be hard on them," he said. "Their Daddy takin' up with a girl probably hardly no older than them."

"Sheriff," I said, "I keep trying to tell you. I didn't 'take up' with

that girl. She was in an auto accident and asked me to drive her down to a garage. Now, either she didn't know the way or she mistook the road. But that's all there was to it."

Barnes shook his head sadly. "Son," he said, "that story don't hold up even on the face of it. How could Bobby Jo have been in an accident? She's only fifteen and you got to be at least sixteen to drive a car. You ought to know that."

"I also know that girl looks a hell of a lot older than any fifteen."

Barnes chuckled again. "Ain't that the truth?" he said. "Acts it, too, don't she?" He looked at me earnestly. "Now we're getting down to the truth of it, aren't we? You saw Bobby Jo twitching her little jeans down the road and figured why not, never realizing she was as young as she is. I won't say she gave you any argument about it, either. Knowing Bobby Jo, I'd say that stuff about you practically forcing her into the car was all for Earl's benefit, just to save her own skin. So now why don't you just admit that was the way it was. It'd save everybody concerned a whole lot of trouble if you did."

"It would?"

"Sure," Barnes said easily. "No point to ruining a man's life for a mistake anybody human could have made. 'Course, I'd have to charge you with something—just to keep Earl from simmering. But it could be something a whole heck of a lot less serious. Like, say, contributing to the delinquency of a minor. That way you could post bond and be on your way. When it came to trial, well, you'd just forfeit the bond. That'd be the same as a guilty plea, of course, but so what? Nobody outside the county'd ever have to know."

"I see," I said. "How much bond?"

"A thousand."

"That's kind of steep, isn't it?"

"It's what the law allows," Barnes said, shrugging. "Of course, if you like we can have the judge set it. But that'd mean waiting over in jail until Monday at least."

"I see," I said again. "All right, if you'll let me have my checkbook back—"

Barnes shook his head. "No checks," he said. He smiled then, but it was clearly an afterthought. "Nothing personal," he said. "Matter of policy."

"Sure," I said. "But policy or not, it puts us right back on square one. You saw my wallet. You know I don't have a thousand dollars in cash."

"No," Barnes said equably. "So I guess we're just going to have to arrange a loan."

I looked at him curiously. "You won't take a check," I said, "but you'll trust me for a loan?"

"Not me," Barnes said. "The bank. All nice and legal and enforceable. That all right with you?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"Not one I'd care to make," Barnes said. He looked at me and when I made an acquiescing motion with my hands he reached for the phone.

"Mr. Arnold?" he said when he had his party. "I think I got a customer for you. About how long would it take you to work up a loan application and papers? —Fine. Man's name is Harold Kayser." He spelled the last name, then put the phone back in its cradle. "Half an hour," he said, looking at his watch. "Which just gives us time for a bite of lunch while we wait."

We ate in a small café midway down the block, Barnes having thoughtfully returned my wallet, change, and checkbook so I could cover my share of the check, but keeping my car keys. Afterward, we walked the rest of the way down to the bank. It was a blocky stone building with space for tellers' cages along one wall inside and officers' desks along the other. Arnold's was the only one completely enclosed by glass walls.

Arnold himself was a thin-shouldered man in his late fifties or early sixties, with thinning black hair plastered across a narrow skull, an equally narrow, sharp-featured face, and small eyes. He looked up but didn't rise as Barnes ushered me in without knocking.

"This is the one I was telling you about," Barnes said. "In for his loan."

"Of course," Arnold said. He looked at me with something like distaste—although it might have been his normal expression—then waved me into a chair and pushed a sheaf of papers across the desk at me. "Sign wherever there's an X," he said. "All copies, please."

To his disgust, I began to read through the papers. "I think you'll find everything in order," he said. "A perfectly properly drawn personal note—no more, no less."

And, as far as I could tell, so it was. The only thing out of line was the amount. I looked up at Barnes. "This is for three thousand," I said. "We were talking one."

Barnes smiled apologetically. "A thousand for the bond," he said.

"You got to realize, though, that on top of that we have to add enough to sweeten Bobby Jo's father—not to mention that Mr. Arnold here deserves a little something more for getting the loan through in such a hurry than the piddling amount of interest the state allows. Of course, if it's more than you can afford to pay back, you can always leave your car for security."

"And then forfeit it when the note came due," I said, "even though it's worth at least twice that much."

Barnes shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"No," I agreed, "I don't imagine it would." I tossed the loan application back on Arnold's desk and leaned back as far as the uncompromising chair would let me. "You two really have got a nice little thing going here, haven't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Arnold said. His voice was clipped and rasping, with none of the sheriff's good-old-boy drawl.

"Come on," I said. "This whole thing's a setup from start to finish and you know it. The car out there in the ditch, Bobby Jo beside it made up to look like she's at least twenty-five, Cousin Earl coming along to rough the poor schnook up, and, last but not least, the understanding sheriff with his easy, practically painless way out. You probably work it five or six times a week, if not more. And that's your trouble. You've done it so often you've gotten careless."

I smiled wryly up at Barnes, who stood leaning back against the door through which we'd entered. "This morning, to get rid of Earl, you asked him if his partner was taking Bobby Jo home. The only thing wrong with that was that nobody had mentioned Bobby Jo or anybody else by name up to that time. So how did you know it was her and not some other girl I'd picked up?"

Barnes nodded sagely. "You're right," he said. "That was careless of me."

"You were even more careless when you talked to our friendly town banker here. You made sure he had my name right, but you never mentioned any amount. But here we are with exactly the amount we need. Amazing, isn't it?"

Barnes continued to nod. "Yep," he said. "'Course, you realize," he went on, "if push ever comes to shove, it's your word against ours that any of these things happened the way you say they did. You think Earl or anybody else'd back you up?"

"Of course not," I said. "But I wanted to be sure everybody knew exactly where I was coming from, because I'm putting the ball right back in your court." I turned to Arnold. "Setup or not, between the

two of you, you've got me where the hair is short. So if it's what you want, all right, I'll sign those papers like a good little boy and you've got your three thousand free and clear. Or we can work out a more profitable arrangement for all of us."

Arnold's small eyes shifted. "Like what?" he said.

I took the Pearson Construction check from my wallet and tossed it onto the banker's desk. "Like that," I said.

Barnes stirred by the doorway. "I already told you no checks."

"I know you did," I said, "but this is a special kind of check. Oh, it's a legitimate Pearson Company check, all right—authorized signature and all. What's different about it is that the company doesn't know it's been issued—and in all likelihood it won't for a good long time."

"That's impossible," Arnold said.

"Maybe it used to be," I said, "but not any more. I'm a computer programmer. Pearson's hired me to set up a program to automate their accounting and budget systems. Nothing wrong with that. More and more companies are getting into computers these days and reaping big advantages from it. Pearson's mistake was trying to cash in on those benefits too early. Last week two-thirds of the present accounting staff got their notices. So did I."

I smiled wryly and shrugged. "The way they figured it, why pay top dollar for a really good programmer when once the program was established any hack could maintain it for half the price? I suppose I'd have been philosophical about it if I hadn't turned down a very good job someplace else on the assurance that the one at Pearson's was secure. In any case, under the circumstances I felt I was more than justified in getting a little of my own back. So one of my last acts as a Pearson employee was to add a subroutine to the program instructing the computer to make one special sixteen-hundred-dollar payment every two weeks and then erase all record of the transaction."

"Can you do that?"

"Easily," I said.

"But won't your replacement see what you've done and correct it?"

I shook my head. "Do you have any idea how detailed and complex a computer program can be? If you want an idea, check out one of the home-computer magazines and see how many columns and lines there are for the simplest video game. Then think how much more there would have to be for a complete business system. Frankly, it

would take a really good programmer months of line-by-line analysis to find those instructions, and even then he'd have to have a pretty good idea of what he was looking for in the first place. But there's no reason he should. The data will always show exactly what the company thinks they should. As for the bank records—well, Pearson's is a multimillion-dollar outfit with funds spread out over a dozen banks in as many states. It could be years before an audit picks up any kind of discrepancy."

"And in the meantime," Barnes said, "you're pulling out thirty-two hundred a month. That's over thirty-eight thousand a year."

"Forty-one point six," I corrected. "You have to remember there are more than four weeks in a month. The only problem is cashing the checks without identification. Using my own name or I.D. would be tempting fate just a little too much. I'd heard there was a bank that was 'understanding' about these matters south of here and was on my way to check it out when you stopped me. But, frankly, I think I've got a surer bet here. So here's my proposition: you forget about Bobby Jo and arrange to cash the checks for me, and we'll split the proceeds 75/25."

Arnold considered for a moment. Finally he said: "Fifty-fifty."

I shook my head. "Sorry, but that's more than I care to give up. So I guess we'll just have to stick to the original deal."

I reached for the check, but Arnold put his hand out to cover it. "I think you're forgetting," he said, "that the sheriff is a sworn officer of the law. A phone call from him to Pearson Construction relaying what you've told us here today would just as effectively squash your scheme as any audit or 'line-by-line analysis.' I don't see where you have any choice but to do business with us—or no one."

It was my turn to be silent. Finally, I nodded. "All right," I said, "you're calling the shots. But I want the sheriff to endorse that check personally. Not his name, of course, but his handwriting. That's my guarantee that he can't change his mind later and decide honesty's the best policy after all."

When the banker nodded, Barnes obediently picked up a pen and, after checking the spelling, scrawled Banner Associates across the back of the check.

"Well," Arnold said, palming the endorsed check and carefully putting it away, "I assume that concludes our business—for today."

"Except for my percentage," I reminded him.

Arnold smiled tightly. "I think we'll send that on to you when the

next check arrives," he said. "That's *our* guarantee you don't change *your* mind."

I shrugged. "Fair enough." I rose. "Well, I won't say it's been a pleasure, but it has been profitable."

"That's the way most business is," Arnold said. He didn't offer to shake hands.

Outside, the sheriff walked me to my car. "I suppose you want to be on your way now," he said.

"If you'll give me back my car keys."

"Oh!" He dug them out of his pocket and seemed genuinely embarrassed he'd forgotten them. "No hard feelings about that business earlier, I hope," he said.

"No. A good ending makes up for a bad beginning any day."

"Ain't that the truth?" he agreed. He was still standing on the pavement, smiling complacently, when I drove off.

I didn't expect any more trouble, but I kept the car right at the speed limit until I was well past the sign telling me I had entered the next county. Four or five miles beyond that was a directional sign for the turnpike. I cut over to it, stopped at the first plaza, and while the car was being gassed and oiled called my office.

"Banner Associates," the receptionist said when she picked up.

"It's me, Carol," I said. "Is Mr. Banner there?"

"Yes, he is, Mr. Kayser. You want me to put you through to him?"

"No, just tell him I was held up on the road and will be late getting in. And ask him to call Pearson's and have them stop payment on the check they gave me for the new software package."

"Stop payment?"

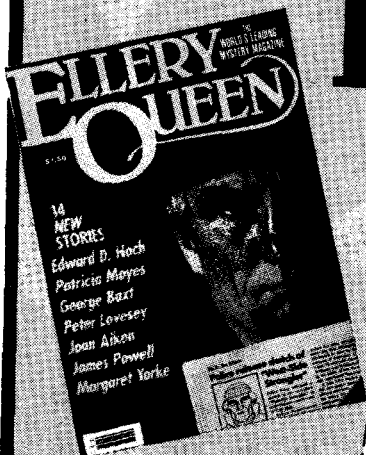
"It's a long story," I said. "I'll explain it all when I get in. Just make sure he understands it's something he should do right away."

"And one other thing, Carol. Check around the office, and if we don't have a good road atlas get one for me. The next time I come this way, I have a feeling I'm going to want to take a different route."

"Q"

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a **NEW** short story by

**IAN STUART**

*At the left of the hall, the stairs rose steep and dark to the first-floor landing. Wide, straight stairs with heavy wooden bannisters designed to accommodate Victorian pretensions and bulky Victorian skirts. Dangerous stairs for someone who was almost blind . . .*

## **THE STEEP, DARK STAIRS**

*by* **IAN STUART**

It was one of those depressing late-autumn afternoons when moisture drips from the bare trees and dusk comes early to city streets. I walked up the road from the Underground station without seeing a car pass in either direction. Not much traffic came along Inkerman Road.

The houses were almost identical, three stories high, with steeply pitched slate roofs and heavy-silled bay windows, differing only in the color of their faded paint. Outside Number 27 a faint mist clung round the streetlamp as if for warmth. I saw the curtain at Number 29 move and a shadowy face as I inserted my key in the lock, turned it, and pushed. The door opened with a slight creak.

"It's me, Mrs. Wyatt," I called.

The old lady liked me to announce myself at once. She pretended it was to give her time to make herself presentable for callers, but I knew the truth was that she was nervous—afraid of some young thug breaking in and raping her. There was nothing to be ashamed of in that. She was over eighty, but nowadays old age and infirmity are no defense against attack and robbery. If I were an old lady living alone, I'd have been nervous, too.

© 1984 by Ian Stuart.

"I'm in here, Mr. Dalby." Her voice was still firm. No sign of enfeebled old age there.

As if I didn't know where she'd be, I thought. Perhaps it was the weather, or Hadley, the manager, keeping me late to discuss a routine return—he was a fussy little man, obsessed with observing the rules and keeping out of trouble until he retired in two years' time—but as I walked down Mrs. Wyatt's tiled hall I felt a sudden spurt of irritation. It wasn't that I minded cashing a check for her once a week. After all, I worked at her bank and it was no trouble, but I had been doing it for nearly four years now, ever since Nora died, and this evening I wanted to get home.

My wife had taken to doing most of the old lady's shopping a year before she died because Mrs. Wyatt was nearly blind and there was a main road to cross to reach the shops and the local branch of the bank. Since Nora's death, I had cashed the weekly check, and the home help the council sent in twice a week did the shopping.

Ahead of me at the left of the hall, the stairs rose steep and dark to the first-floor landing. Wide, straight stairs with heavy wooden bannisters designed to accommodate Victorian pretensions and bulky Victorian skirts. Dangerous stairs for someone who was almost blind.

The drawing room was large and high-ceilinged but seemed smaller than it was because of the quantity of heavy old furniture crammed into it. There were long velvet curtains at the French windows and a huge mirror in a mahogany frame over the tiled fireplace. Except where it was covered by the furniture, the pattern of the carpet had faded until it was almost invisible and there were threadbare patches.

Mrs. Wyatt was sitting in her favorite high-backed chair facing the television set. It was switched on, but she couldn't see the picture. Maybe she listened to the sound. Or perhaps she exaggerated her blindness a little as old people sometimes do exaggerate their infirmities. Not that she made much of her bad heart—she hardly ever mentioned it.

"Any sudden shock and I could go just like that, the doctor says," she had told me once in a rare moment of revelation. And she had laughed. She might not be a very nice old woman but she had courage.

"Hallo, Mrs. Wyatt," I said, "I've brought your money." Taking my wallet from my pocket, I counted out the notes. "Forty pounds. I'll put it on the table under the ashtray."

What we said to each other hardly changed from week to week. That was where she liked me to put the money—always forty pounds, weighted safely with the heavy glass ashtray she used only as a paperweight because she didn't smoke and she had few visitors. The first time I cashed her check, I handed the money to her and she became quite flustered, scolding me as if I were a little boy instead of a man of forty-nine doing her a good turn, because, holding it, her hands weren't free to pick up her handbag from the floor beside her chair and she didn't know what to do with it.

"Thank you, Mr. Dalby."

We had lived next door to each other for nearly fifteen years, but anything less formal would have been unthinkable to us both. Once a week for four years, less a few when I was away, she must have said that nearly two hundred times. Now the words came automatically, without thought, and I doubted if she really felt any gratitude. Like many old women, she took the little service for granted as her right.

"My nephew's coming to stay," she told me, a triumphant note in her voice.

"Oh?" I said. I could understand her excitement. It would be a major event for her. I couldn't remember anyone coming to stay here before.

"He's my only living relative. You might say he's my heir." She chuckled. "I've left something to the Blind Institute people and the guide dogs, but the rest will go to Ronald. I've no one else to leave my bits and pieces to."

Bits and pieces! I thought. This house would realize at least 60,000 pounds if it was sold now—probably a good deal more. That might not be a fortune, but it wouldn't be a miserly inheritance for a nephew who had never visited his aunt before. And I knew she had some jewelry. Nothing that you'd call really valuable, but nice Victorian pieces fetched good prices these days.

"That's the one who lives in Dembury?" I asked.

"Yes—Ronald. He's coming next Thursday."

"How long will he be here for?"

"I don't know. I hope he'll be able to stay a nice long time."

"Let's hope so," I agreed. It was a lie. I didn't like the idea of his coming at all, and the longer he stayed the worse it would be.

"He's an accountant," Mrs. Wyatt said. "So he'll be able to advise me about my money."

"I'm sure he will," I told her, a dreadful empty feeling at the pit of my stomach.

The nephew's name was Ronald Vickers. He was in his late thirties, a weedy man with a ridiculous little moustache and fair hair going thin on the top of his head. He looked weak and shift and I disliked him on sight.

Thursday was the day I cashed the old lady's check and when I took her the money on my way home he was there, sitting in one of the big easy chairs, his legs stretched out across the hearth-rug, very much at home. When she introduced us, he didn't stand up to shake hands—he just nodded and gave me a complacent smirk. I didn't mind. It would make what I planned easier if I didn't like him.

"I'll leave my key, Mrs. Wyatt," I said, ignoring him as pointedly as I could. "You won't need me to cash your check while Ron's here."

"Oh, Mr. Dalby, I think—" she began.

"No, we shan't," Ron agreed with me, interrupting her.

I put the key which originally she had given Nora on the table beside the forty pounds. Ron came over, picked it up, and started threading it on his key ring.

"Was there anything else?" he inquired rudely.

An expression of shocked disapproval flitted across Mrs. Wyatt's thin features. To her, ill manners were the privilege of the old. But she said nothing.

"No, nothing else," I replied.

I was glad to get out of the house.

The next day I started making inquiries about Ronald Vickers. Dembury wasn't a large town and by a lucky chance I knew a man on the staff of the bank there. I rang him and explained what I wanted—that Mrs. Wyatt was an old customer and I didn't trust her nephew not to try to swindle her. He promised to find out all he could and phone me back.

He rang that afternoon. The nearest Vickers had ever achieved to being an accountant was a spell as a clerk in the accounts department of a local firm when he was eighteen. They had sacked him. He was what he looked—a petty crook who specialized in conning old ladies out of their savings and other forms of minor theft. He had been in prison three times, on the last occasion for eighteen

months. The next time, I thought with satisfaction, it would be longer than eighteen months. A whole lot longer.

I told myself I must have patience and not be in too much of a hurry. It would look suspicious if anything happened too soon after his arrival. And I reckoned I was in no immediate danger, I could afford to wait.

The days passed and he showed no signs of leaving. I wondered what he had told his aunt to explain why he didn't have to go to work. It was hardly likely he had admitted the truth, that he hadn't had a job since coming out of jail four months ago.

Every evening just before nine he left the house and walked down the road past my windows. It was a good hour before he returned and I suspected he visited the Bunch of Grapes, a big, brassy pub just round the corner in the main road. One evening I looked in there myself about a quarter to ten, and sure enough he was in a corner of the lounge bar with a pinched-looking middle-aged blonde.

It occurred to me he might be an impostor and not Ron Vickers at all. Mrs. Wyatt hadn't seen her nephew for years, and nearly blind as she was it probably wouldn't be too difficult to deceive her. When the idea first came to me I froze with panic. But then I saw it didn't make any difference. As far as I was concerned, an imitation nephew was as good as the real thing.

He had been there just over a week when Jacqui, one of the cashiers at the bank, came to my desk and said she had a customer at her till who wanted to cash one of Mrs. Wyatt's checks. "He says you know him and you'll say it's all right," she finished.

I looked over at the line of tills. The customer was Ron, all right. "Let me see the check," I told Jacqui.

It was made out to Cash for two hundred pounds. Conscious of his eyes on me, I examined it carefully. The signature was almost certainly Mrs. Wyatt's—he had probably persuaded her to sign it before he filled in the amount. Not that she would have been able to read what he'd written anyway, but that sort of caution came naturally to crooks like Ron.

I went up to the counter. He appeared to be leaning on it casually, without a care in the world, but his eyes were wary and I could see he was nervous.

"Hallo, Ron," I said.

"Hallo, squire. What's the problem?"

"No problem."

"Auntie wants me to get her some things."

"It's all right," I said to Jacqui. "I know Mr. Vickers."

Ron gave his sly grin and watched Jacqui count out the notes. She pushed them to him under the screen and he stuffed them away in his wallet.

She frowned as he walked away and out of the bank. "I didn't like him."

"I don't blame you," I told her. "I wouldn't trust him an inch."

Give him just a little more rope, I thought. I couldn't afford to wait much longer.

The next morning Hadley called me into his office. He was hunched behind his desk, his head sunk into his shoulders and his forehead creased, looking more harassed than ever.

"You know old Mrs. Wyatt, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes," I agreed. "I live next door to her."

"Is she all right?"

"How do you mean? She's nearly blind and her heart isn't too good, but she's all there. Is something wrong?" Pangs of anxiety were beginning to make themselves evident inside me.

"I've just had a call from her. She wants to give her nephew two thousand pounds to start a business."

The anxiety evaporated. Ron must be desperate for money to risk queering his pitch, cashing the check yesterday and now putting pressure on his aunt to give him this amount of cash. From my point of view, it was a good thing. It would strengthen the evidence against him.

"He's a nasty bit of work," I commented. "But it's her money. I don't see much we can do about it."

"That's just the point," Hadley remarked grimly. "There isn't. She hasn't got anything like two thousand pounds. Not here, anyway. There's less than two hundred in her checking account and fifty-seven in her savings account."

"Oh," I said.

"She used to keep a good balance. I've looked back. It was nearly three thousand pounds three years ago, but she's gradually run it down. You know what old women are, they don't realize how expensive things have become and they can't go on living the way they used to. It looks as if she spends quite a lot from her account."

"I saw she was getting a bit low the other day," I admitted. "And

her nephew cashed a check of hers for two hundred pounds yesterday."

"Has she any other savings, do you know?" Hadley asked. "Investments or anything?"

"Not as far as I know."

He looked more worried than ever. "Do you think the nephew's been putting pressure on her?"

It was exactly what I did think. Undue influence, the law called it. Old people, especially lonely old women like Mrs. Wyatt, were particularly vulnerable. And it was very difficult to prove.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said.

"Oh, lord! I'd better ring her back and try to explain," Hadley said miserably. It wasn't pleasant telling somebody one of their nearest and dearest was robbing them. Often they took it out on you.

"I could slip round to see her this evening," I volunteered.

"Would you?" His eagerness was almost pathetic. Then his face fell. "But if he's there—"

"He won't be. He goes out to the pub every evening."

"Maybe that would be best then. I'll leave it to you, Harry."

He looked so pleased with himself you'd have thought he was the one who was taking the responsibility.

Sitting in the darkness of my front room, the curtains not quite closed, I waited impatiently for Ron to depart for the Bunch of Grapes. The minutes dragged by. I hardly ever used that room and it was cold, but I dared not go to fetch an electric fire in case he came out while I was away.

Nine o'clock passed and he still hadn't appeared. Then, at four minutes past, when I was beginning to wonder if he was going out this evening after all, I heard the front door of Number 27 slam quietly and he came down the few feet of path to the road, walking with his curious, furtive gait.

I closed the curtains and went along the hall to the kitchen. The few things I needed were ready on the table. What I planned wouldn't take long, but I couldn't afford to waste time searching for them—I must be back here safe in my own house before Ron returned. Ticking them off mentally as I did so, I slipped them into my jacket pocket one by one: a length of thin cord about six feet long, a penknife, a torch. Satisfied, I put on my gloves and left the house by the front door.

It was a mild evening but I shivered as I walked up the path of

Number 27. For a second or two, my resolution faltered and I had to fight an impulse to turn back. But there could be no retreating now—that way lay ruin and, a distinct possibility, prison. Taking from my pocket the key I had had cut before returning the original to Mrs. Wyatt, I pushed it into the lock and turned it. The door opened with its familiar little creak. I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me.

An edge of light was showing under the drawing-room door and I could hear the television or a radio on in there: a variety show from the roars of laughter. The light seemed to accentuate the darkness in the hall and I could see nothing of the stairs just ahead and to my left. It wasn't fear of being discovered there that set my nerves on edge and my heart thudding—Ron wouldn't be back for an hour, at least, and if the old lady came out she wouldn't see me—it was the prospect of what I was going to do. For murder was irrevocable.

My conscience wasn't troubling me. In a detached sort of way, I was sorry about Mrs. Wyatt—but while she lived I was in danger. Killing her was necessary. It was a question of self-defense. Anyway, she was old and it wasn't much of a life, blind and with a weak heart. As for Ron, it was poetic justice he should take the blame for her death. He was a crook and he had been swindling her. Besides, if it hadn't been for his coming here, there would have been no need for his aunt to die. Things could have gone on as they had for the last four years.

I edged forward.

How much farther? Ten feet? Twelve? The darkness was almost tangible, something solid I could feel. Perhaps that was nerves, too.

Then my right foot stumbled against something. Panic gripped me. A cat? Whatever it was was soft and yielding. Mrs. Wyatt disliked cats, but an inquisitive animal might have smuggled itself into the house for warmth. But a cat would have sensed my coming and streaked off, screeching, when I kicked it. This thing hadn't moved. And it was too heavy for a cat.

I had to use my torch now. Hands trembling, I took it from my pocket, wrapped my left hand round the lens to mask the light, and switched it on.

There, lying in a heap at the foot of the stairs, her skirt dragged up and her right leg trailing across the bottom tread, was Mrs. Wyatt.

For a moment I was too startled to move. Shock had drained all

the strength from my limbs. Then the moment passed and I made myself stoop down and feel for the pulse in her neck. She was dead.

I find it hard now to remember what I felt at that moment. Shock, yes. But most, I think, relief. Mrs. Wyatt was dead and I had played no part in her death. She must have gone upstairs after Ron went out, tripped, and fallen. All the planning I had done, all the fear I had felt, had been unnecessary. Now all I had to do was get back to my own house as quickly as possible and leave Ron to find her when he returned.

Turning, I retraced the few steps to the door, switched off my torch, and let myself out. A minute later I was safe back home.

It was just after eleven the next morning when the two men came to the bank. They were both middle-aged and well built and they asked to see Hadley. After they had been with him for about a quarter of an hour he rang through and asked me to go in.

"This is Detective Superintendent Haynes," he told me, introducing the older of the men. "And Detective Sergeant Clark."

A spasm of fear went through me. But what had I to be afraid of? Intending to commit a murder wasn't a crime and I hadn't been responsible for Mrs. Wyatt's death. In any case, they couldn't be here about that—a heart attack and a fall down the stairs wouldn't involve a CID superintendent. No, it must be something else.

"Good morning, Mr. Dalby," Haynes said.

"Good morning, Superintendent." I was conscious of two pairs of eyes appraising me.

"It's about old Mrs. Wyatt," Hadley explained.

"Oh?" I hoped I had managed the right blend of interest and surprise.

"She was found dead in her house this morning," The Superintendent said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. She was over eighty and I know her heart wasn't strong."

"It wasn't her heart. She fell down the stairs."

"Oh, no!" I really did sound shocked, I thought. "They're very steep and she was almost blind."

"So we understand."

"It must have been a shock for Ron, finding her."

"Ron? Is that Mr. Vickers?"

"Yes. He's her nephew—he's staying with her." But they know that, I thought.

"He didn't find her."

"Oh?" I was startled. "Who did?"

"Mrs. Wyatt's home help, a lady called Mrs. Price. Mr. Vickers stayed with a friend last night." Haynes paused. "When did you last see the old lady, Mr. Dalby?"

"Several days ago."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you go to see her last night?" Hadley asked. "You said you would." He looked puzzled and slightly foolish.

"I tried, but there wasn't any answer," I told him.

"Something to do with her account?" the Superintendent inquired.

Hadley nodded. To me, he said, "Head Office have agreed that in the circumstances we may give the police any information they want."

"Circumstances?" I repeated, wondering what he meant.

"We're not satisfied Mrs. Wyatt's death was an accident," Haynes explained. "She died sometime early last night, but the light wasn't on and it looks as if she tripped over a cord tied across one of the top stairs. It had broken but the ends were still there. She fell backwards down the stairs and broke her neck." He turned to Hadley. "Why was Mr. Dalby going to see her last night, sir?"

There were two police cars outside Number 27 when I turned in at my gate that evening. I wondered if they had arrested Ron yet. He must have fastened the cord across the stairs before he went off to the pub to meet his friend. The pinched-looking blonde, I supposed. Perhaps even now he was helping them with their inquiries—in the time-honored phrase.

As I took my key ring from my pocket, I felt like singing. I was safe. Nobody would know now what I had done. Good old Ron, he didn't know what a good turn he'd done me last night.

I tried to push the key into the lock.

It didn't fit—only the first eighth of an inch or so went in. I took it out and looked at it.

"Is it the wrong key, Mr. Dalby?"

I turned. Haynes was standing by the gate, two other men just behind him.

"May I see it?" he asked pleasantly.

"It's my office key," I muttered. Even to me, my voice sounded forced.

"Oh?" Haynes was still holding out his hand and there was nothing I could do but hand him the key. "Robinson," he said.

A uniformed constable stepped forward and took it from him. With a sense of the inevitable, I watched him walk up the next-door path, push the key in the lock, and turn it. The door opened.

Why hadn't I got rid of it last night? I thought, angered by my own stupidity. But I knew why. I had been so sure I had nothing to fear. And I still hadn't! After all, Mrs. Wyatt had given me a key to her house—if Ron said I'd returned it, it would be his word against mine. And he was a crook with a police record.

"Not the office key, then, Mr. Dalby?" Haynes remarked.

"I must have mixed them up," I said. "I gave her key back to Mrs. Wyatt. At least, I thought I had. Ask Mr. Vickers—he was there."

"We have. He says he didn't see you give it back to her. In fact, according to him, the old lady was saying only yesterday she must ask you for it now that he was staying with her."

I was shocked. How could Ron lie like that? Why should he? But I knew why.

"He's lying," I said desperately.

"Very likely," Haynes agreed. "I wouldn't think he's a man who's very particular about the truth. But it doesn't make any difference, does it, Mr. Dalby? Either you kept the key or you had a duplicate cut before you returned it to Mrs. Wyatt." He paused. "Shall we go inside? I daresay the neighbors are watching and wondering what's going on."

Inside, the house was cold and unwelcoming. In silence, I led the way to the dining room. The other two men came, too—one of them stationed himself by the French windows, the other stayed just inside the door.

"She was a very methodical old lady," Haynes remarked. "That's why it seemed strange there were no bank statements in the drawer with her other papers. Receipts, checkbooks, old check stubs, everything else—but no statements. Not for the last four years. And the stubs were all filled in—only there weren't any amounts for the checks made payable to cash. Funny that."

"I made out the checks for cash," I said. My mouth was dry. "There didn't seem any need to fill in the amount, she had seventy pounds every week."

"You're sure that's what you gave her? Seventy pounds?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure."

"It seems rather a lot of cash for an old lady living alone who hardly went out, especially as she paid most of her bills by check. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose it does," I agreed. "But that's what she wanted."

"And you used to bring her her statement—it was never posted to her. That's what they told me at your bank."

"I explained it to her."

"Yes, of course. She couldn't read, could she? One of the neighbors says Mrs. Wyatt told her you looked after all her business affairs. Only she told her you cashed forty pounds for her every week. Forty, not seventy, Mr. Dalby. What happened when you went to see her last night?"

"Nothing. I couldn't make her hear. You heard me tell Mr. Hadley so this morning."

"So I did. But another neighbor says she saw you let yourself in. She knew you had a key and she wasn't worried, as it was you, but she did think it was a funny time for you to be going to see the old lady."

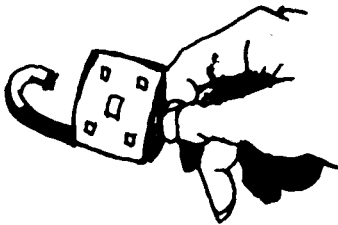
"All right," I said. "But she was dead when I got there. Ron did it. He's a crook—he's been to jail. And he was her heir."

"We know all about Mr. Vickers," Haynes agreed. "He's been very frank. He says she told him she was leaving most of her money to charities for the blind and it would've suited him better for her to stay alive. Then he could have talked her into giving him money now and then."

"But you're different. You're respectable. You were scared he'd find out what you'd been up to all these years and tell her. I reckon it must come to round about six thousand pounds you've swindled her out of. It would have been the end for you, wouldn't it? You'd have lost your job and your pension and probably gone to prison."

"I tell you, she was dead when I got there!" I shouted.

It was the truth, but they didn't believe me.



a **NEW** short story by

**PATRICIA McGERR**

*"No, dear," Miss Wylie said. "We all see her, but the rest of us are used to it. She's there every Friday. We try not to take any notice. For Mr. Johnson's sake." She gestured toward the driver. "It's very hard on him, poor man. You see, he was driving the bus when it happened."*

*A story of pitiable, relentless vengeance and its consequence—as it usually happens in real life, the everyday commonplace adding starkly to the sense of tragedy . . .*

## **FATAL CORNER**

**by PATRICIA McGERR**

Gresham's Department Store where I sell women's budget dresses stays open until nine o'clock three nights a week. When they asked me to work late on Thursdays and Fridays, I hesitated. I live with my parents out in the country and it's nearly an hour's drive each way. But the change meant a raise in salary as well as every other Saturday off. So, after I checked the bus schedule and found there was one leaving at 9:05 P.M. that would get me home before ten, I accepted the offer.

When I boarded the bus that first Friday, it was crowded with late shoppers, but most of them got off before we passed the city limits. By the time we turned onto the narrow road that circles Pine Tree Canyon, there were only six passengers left. I was sitting beside Mrs. Ryan, who is salad maker in the store cafeteria. We were both tired and didn't feel much like conversation, so I was watching the road in front of the bus when it made a sharp turn.

Suddenly, the headlights caught a small girl on a bicycle. She appeared to be about eight or nine years old and was dressed in

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shorts and a T-shirt. Her fair hair hung down her back in pigtails tied with a bright-red ribbon. At the moment I saw her, she was riding across the road directly in front of the bus. I braced myself for the fast braking that would bring the vehicle to a screeching halt. Instead, as it was almost upon the child, we seemed to increase speed. I half rose in my seat, ready to cry out a warning, but Mrs. Ryan pressed her hand over my mouth and held me back.

"Hush yourself, dear," she whispered. "It's only a ghost."

"A what? You can't—" As I sputtered a protest, the bus passed over the spot where the child had been and Mrs. Ryan took her hand away. I strained to see through the darkness beside the road, sure the rider had by some miracle escaped collision. No one was there.

"Don't be upset," Mrs. Ryan soothed. "It's the little Barlow girl. You must have heard about the accident. She was killed right in that spot last summer."

"Are you saying that her ghost haunts this road? But that's crazy!" I looked around the bus. The man across the aisle was reading a newspaper. A couple in the front seat were having an animated discussion about prices. Behind us, Miss Wylie from the accounting department was knitting a sweater. "How can they be so calm? Are you and I the only ones who saw her?"

"No, dear. We all see her, but the rest of us are used to it. She's there every Friday. We try not to take any notice. For Mr. Johnson's sake." She gestured toward the driver. "It's very hard on him, poor man. You see, he was driving the bus when it happened."

Mrs. Ryan got off at the next stop, so I wasn't able to learn any more from her that night, but at breakfast the next morning I asked my folks if they knew anything about a bus hitting a little girl on a bike.

"Oh, yes," my mother answered. "It was very sad. Surely you remember, Sis. Everyone was talking about it."

"No, I don't. It must have happened while I was on vacation."

"That's right," my father confirmed. "You came back right after Labor Day and the accident was in the middle of August."

"It was a great tragedy," my mother said. "Her name was Janey Barlow—or was it Jenny? Nine years old and a pretty little thing to judge by the picture in the paper."

"With blonde pigtails tied with a bow?"

"Well, I don't recall the bow, but—" She frowned, thinking it over. "Yes, she was blonde and I believe there were pigtails. Her family hadn't lived in the area very long. They bought a house in that new

development up above the canyon. Overpriced but very nice. They sold mostly to young couples with children. The Barlows still live there, don't they, Frank?"

"As far as I know. The wife had a breakdown and had to go away for a while, but I expect she's recovered and back home again."

"Was it the bus driver's fault?"

"Not at all," my father said. "There was a hearing, of course, but he was completely exonerated. The people on the bus were all witnesses. They told how the little girl came down a side road and was right in front of the bus when it came round the corner. He jammed on the brakes but couldn't get it stopped in time. She was thrown off the bicycle and struck her head on a rock. She was killed instantly, the coroner said."

"*Mr. Barlow* blamed the driver, though," my mother added. "The paper said he stood up in court and called him a murderer. Well, you can understand his feelings. She was their only child."

"The driver must have felt terrible, too."

"I'm sure he did," she agreed. "It must be an awful burden to know you killed someone, even if you couldn't help it."

"The kid shouldn't have been out that late," my father decreed. "They ought to have taught her never to ride her bike on the highway."

"That's easy enough to say," my mother returned. "But the way children are nowadays, what can you do?" She shook her head. "You can't watch them all the time. I remember when you were that age, Sis. You were a regular daredevil."

They took off on recollections of my reckless childhood and no more was said about the Barlow girl. I thought of telling them that I'd seen her ghost, but by daylight it seemed absurd. Perhaps, I told myself, I'd dreamed the whole episode—the sight on the highway, the exchange with Mrs. Ryan. After coming back from last summer's vacation, I'd probably heard talk about the child's death and it had stayed in the back of my mind until last night when riding the late bus had brought it to the surface and turned it into the stuff of nightmare. It's queer how vivid dreams can be.

The following Thursday I rode the late bus again. It was an uneventful trip. By then I had nearly convinced myself that I had imagined or dreamed the phantom bicyclist.

The next night I sat beside a late shopper who got off shortly

before we reached the old canyon road. Mrs. Ryan immediately slipped into the empty seat.

"We'll be seeing her soon," she said softly. "Just try to stay calm."

"Seeing whom?" I asked.

"The Barlow child. You saw her last week, remember? She's always there on Fridays. It's a pity the little mite can't find rest."

"I don't believe in ghosts, Mrs. Ryan," I said firmly.

"Don't you, dear?" Her tone was indulgent. "Then maybe you'd better shut your eyes at the next turn. It's hard not to believe in what you see."

Of course I kept my eyes open. I told myself that what I thought I'd seen the week before, what Mrs. Ryan described as a ghost, must be an optical illusion, a play of light on the rock formation that lined the road. Then the bus rounded the corner and there she was. A small girl leaning forward over the handlebars, pedalling furiously, her pigtails swinging as she rode her bicycle across the road. Again I felt the bus gain speed. Mrs. Ryan patted my hand as I suppressed an urge to cry out.

"Poor soul," she murmured. "If we could just find out what it is she wants and get it for her, then she'd be at peace."

I didn't answer. I couldn't think of anything to say and I was relieved when we reached her stop.

As soon as Mrs. Ryan was off the bus, Miss Wylie moved forward to sit beside me. "I suppose," she began, "Mrs. Ryan has been filling your head with ghost stories. I hope you're not gullible enough to believe such nonsense."

"I did see something, though," I said reluctantly. "I saw it last week and again tonight. It looked like a girl on a bicycle and the bus went right through her. Mrs. Ryan told me it happens every week."

"That much is correct," she conceded. "No doubt you know about the accident."

"I didn't until last weekend. After seeing—what we saw—I asked my parents about it. They said a child was killed at that corner last August, but it wasn't the driver's fault. If that's true, I don't understand why he should be haunted."

"There's no haunting," Miss Wylie scoffed. "At least, not in the way that superstitious old woman means it."

"What is it we see then, if it's not a ghost?"

"I was at the hearing," she answered. "All of us who were on the

bus that night were called to testify. Jenny Barlow's father sat through it with a terrible look on his face, staring the whole time at the driver. At the end, when the judge announced the finding of accidental death and said nobody was to blame, he went berserk. He yelled that his daughter had been murdered and her murderer would have to pay. It took two men to hold him back or he would have attacked Johnson right there in the courtroom."

"I can see how losing his child that way could make him pretty irrational. Do you think he has something to do with—these appearances?"

"He's a professional photographer," she explained. "Before they moved here, he worked in Hollywood on commercials and documentaries. They say he has part of his house fixed up as a studio and a darkroom. If you go to the movies much, you know what remarkable things they can do with special effects."

"Is that what you think we see on the road—some kind of trick photography?"

"He's an expert," she answered. "And he must have taken many pictures of his own daughter. What better way could he find to take revenge on the man who killed her?"

"But how cruel!" I looked at Mr. Johnson. With the accident scene behind us, he had settled back in the seat, but there was still tension in the set of his shoulders. "I can see how Mr. Barlow would be distraught at the time it happened. But that was months ago. To go on torturing a man like this week after week is unnatural. Can't somebody stop him?"

"They can't even prove he's doing it," Miss Wylie returned. "Oh, the police sent someone out to question him and the bus company made its own investigation. But whatever device Barlow has rigged up, it's well hidden and can be operated by remote control. He told them he knew nothing about it and insisted that his daughter wouldn't have to come out of her grave if justice had been done. And, since there's no law against showing pictures on a country road, that was the end of it as far as the authorities were concerned."

"Why doesn't Mr. Johnson transfer to another route?" I suggested. "Or he could at least stop driving on Friday nights if that's the only time she appears."

"I'm sure the bus company would let him," she agreed. "But in the beginning everybody assumed it would stop after a few weeks. No one could foresee that the father's madness would last for so many months. And now it seems to have become a kind of contest,

a test of wills. Johnson knows he's innocent, and to ask for a different route, let Barlow win, might seem to be an admission of guilt. Call it pride or stubbornness or whatever, it's gone on too long now for either man to give in."

"How awful for them both."

"When you discussed the child's death with your parents, did you tell them you thought you'd seen her ghost?"

"No, it seemed too foolish. In fact, the next morning when I mentioned it to them I doubted if I'd really seen anything."

She nodded approval. "It's better not to talk about it. Even Mrs. Ryan has sense enough to realize that spreading this around could only do harm, especially to Mr. Johnson. Since there are so few of us who ride the bus this far, we've been able to keep it quiet. I hope you'll continue to be discreet."

"I will," I promised. "I certainly don't want to cause the driver any more trouble."

After that I began to take a book with me to work on Fridays. Reading it on the trip home was a way to keep from watching the road and seeing again and again the image, in living color, of the now dead girl. Even so, no matter how absorbing the story, I always felt the bus accelerate as we turned the fatal corner and I knew, without raising my eyes, that we had once more passed through the eerie presence.

As the weeks passed, I, like my fellow passengers, grew used to it. But I could never entirely put out of my mind those two tormented men. The father, deranged by grief, somewhere up in the hills listening for the bus to reach the place where he could, perhaps by the pressure of a button, cause a reenactment of what he believed had been his daughter's murder. And the driver, dogged by the reminder that he had, no matter how guiltlessly, ended a child's life, each week drawing near to that corner, anticipating what he would see, hands tight on the wheel, foot pressing hard on the gas pedal in order to get past it as quickly as possible. It can't go on forever, I told myself. Someday Mr. Barlow would dismantle his equipment and give them both a chance to forget.

Then one night I boarded the bus as usual and took a seat near the front. It was a fine spring evening, unseasonably warm, with the scent of early blossoms in the air. The woman beside me was laden with packages and bubbling with pleasure at the bargains she had found. The start of a three-day clearance sale had brought a

rush of business and I was worn out. When she got off a short time before we reached the canyon, I relaxed in the seat, rotating my neck to ease the taut muscles and flexing my tired fingers. Tomorrow would be just as busy and Saturday was likely to be a mob scene.

I put up my hand to cover a yawn just as we turned what I now thought of as the Barlow corner. There, as always, the headlights revealed a bicycling child. And, as always, the bus increased speed.

Only it wasn't as always. Instead of blond pigtails, the short-cropped hair was dark brown. And today, I realized a second before I heard the sickening crunch of glass and metal, was Thursday. Wrong day. Wrong child.



**an Abe Levine story by**

**DONALD E. WESTLAKE**

*Whenever one mobster killed another, great smiles of happiness lit up the faces in the precinct houses. But Abe Levine just couldn't take pleasure from the death of a human being, no matter what he had done in his life.*

*The story which follows is included in a collection titled Levine just published by The Mysterious Press. In his Introduction to the book, Abe Levine's creator, Donald E. Westlake, says, "In any mystery story, one element is inevitably the detective's attitude toward death, his reaction to the concept of death . . . It has become the convention that policemen, professional detectives, are hardened to death, immune to life untimely nipped." But, he adds, it was the idea of a cop, a police detective, who was so tensely aware of his own inevitable death that he wound up hating people who took the idea of death frivolously, that led him to write about N.Y.P.D. detective Abe Levine. An intensely human character, as you will see . . .*

## **AFTER I'M GONE**

**by DONALD E. WESTLAKE**

Afternoon visiting hours at the hospital were from two till five, so when Detective Abraham Levine of Brooklyn's Forty-third Precinct got off his tour at four P.M. he took a Rockaway Parkway bus to the hospital and spent thirty-five minutes with Detective Andy Stettin. Levine and Andy had been together when Andy was hit, a bullet high on the left side of the chest, fired through a closed door. Andy, a promising youngster, a hotshot, one of the new breed of college-graduate cops, had been close to death for a while, but was

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now on the mend, and very bored and impatient with hospital routine.

It wasn't really necessary for Levine to go through this ritual every day, nor did he have that much to say to the youngster. In fact, he knew full well he was only doing it because he so much didn't want to. There was a certain amount of guilt involved, since Levine was secretly happy that the bullet had ended his brief partnership with Andy Stettin, but in truth Andy wasn't the main point here at all. The main point was the hospital.

To Andy Stettin, healthy and self-assured, the hospital was merely a nuisance and a bore. To Abraham Levine, fifty-five years of age, short and stocky, overweight and short of wind, with a tired heart that skipped the occasional beat, the hospital was a horrible presentiment, an all-too-possible future. Those sad withered men, shrunken within their maroon or brown robes, shuffling down the wide featureless corridors in their Christmas-present slippers, were a potential tomorrow that could be very close indeed. Going to the hospital every afternoon was for Levine a painful repeated confrontation with his worst fears.

Today, a Thursday, Levine told Andy that there continued to be no break in the case of Maurice Gold, during the investigation of whose murder Andy had been shot by a drug dealer who, unfortunately, was not Gold's killer. Andy shrugged, not really interested: "Gold is gonna stay Open," he said.

Levine had to agree. With some sort of reverse logic, when a case became inactive the Police Department phrase was that it was Opened. "Open that," meant in reality to close it, to cease to work on it. The reason behind the Newspeak phraseology was that only an arrest could Close a case; an inactive case could always be reactivated by fresh evidence, and therefore it would remain—unto eternity, most likely—Open.

Levine and Andy also talked a while about Levine's regular partner, Jack Crawley, a big, shambling, mean-looking harness bull with whom Levine had a very easy and reassuring relationship. Crawley had just come back on duty this week after his convalescent leave—he had been, several months ago, shot in the leg—and the long spell of inactivity had made him more bristly and bad-tempered than ever. "I think he'll arrest *me* pretty soon," Levine said.

Andy laughed at that, but what he mostly wanted to talk about was a nurse he had his eye on, a pretty young thing, very short and compact, squeezed into a too-tight uniform. Both times the girl

passed by while Levine was there, Andy did some elephantine flirting, very heavy-handed arch remarks that Levine found embarrassing but which the girl appeared to enjoy. The second time, after both men had watched the provocative departure of the nurse, Andy grinned and said, "The sap still rises, eh, Abe?"

"The sap also sets," Levine told him, getting to his feet. "See you tomorrow, Andy."

"Thanks for coming by."

Levine was walking down the wide corridor, not meeting the eyes of the ambulatory patients, when a hand touched his elbow and a gravelly voice said, quietly, "Let's just walk around here a while."

Surprised, Levine looked to his right and saw a short, blocky, pugnacious-looking man of about his own age, wearing an expensive topcoat over a rather wrinkled suit, and an old-fashioned snap brim hat pulled low enough to make it difficult to see his eyes. Levine noticed the awkward bunchiness of the man's tie-knot, as though he had got himself up in costume like a trick-or-treater, as though his real persona existed in some other mode.

The man gave Levine a quick sidelong glance from under his hatbrim. His hand held firmly to Levine's elbow. "You're a cop, right? Abraham Levine, detective. Visiting the cop in there."

"Yes?"

"So let's talk a little bit."

They had reached an intersection of corridors. The elevators were straight ahead, but the man was pulling Levine to the right. "Talk about what?" Levine asked, trying to shake loose.

"Cops and robbers," the man said. "I got a proposition."

Levine planted his feet, refusing to move. Peeling the man's fingers from his elbow, he said, "What sort of proposition?"

With darting movements of his head, the man shot wary glances along the corridors. "I don't like it here," he said. "Exposed here."

"Exposed to what?"

"Listen," the man said, moving closer, his breath warm on Levine's chin, his hatbrim nearly touching Levine's face. "You know Giacomo Polito," he said.

"I know who he is. Mafia chieftain. He controls one of the five families."

"I'm a soldier for him," the man said, his voice low but harsh, pushing with intensity. "I know Giacomo's whole life story."

Levine frowned, trying to see this too-close face, read meaning into the tone of the husky tense voice. Was this an offer of infor-

mation? The setting was unusual, the manner odd, but what else could it be? Levine said, "You want to sell that life story?"

"Don't rush me." Another darting glance. "Giacomo disappeared my son," the man said, still in the same breathy way. "He knows I know."

"Ah."

"You take your bus, like you do," the man said. "Look out the back window. When you see a green Buick following, you get off the bus. There's a, kind of a flower on the aerial."

"And who are you?" Levine asked him. "What's your name?"

"What's the dif? Call me Bobby."

"Bobby?" The incongruity of that name with this man made Levine smile despite himself.

The man looked up, facing Levine more directly than before. He too smiled, but with an edge to it. "That was my son's name," he said.

The green Buick with the red plastic chrysanthemum taped to its antenna followed the bus for a dozen blocks before Levine decided to follow through. Then he got off at the next stop, stood at the curb while the bus drove off, and waited for the Buick to stop in front of him.

The delay had been because Levine wasn't entirely sure what he thought of "Bobby" and his story. A Mafia soldier who decided to defect usually did so when under indictment himself for some major crime, when he could trade his knowledge for softer treatment from the courts. Simple revenge between criminals rarely included squealing to the police. If Bobby's son had been killed by Giacomo Polito, in the normal course of events Bobby would simply kill Polito, or be himself killed in the attempt. The Mafia tended to run very much along the lines of a Shakespearean tragedy, with few roles for outsiders.

In addition, if Bobby had decided that *his* vengeance required selling Polito to the police, why not do it the normal way? Why not simply drive to Manhattan and go to the Organized Crime Unit in Police Headquarters and make his deal there? Why talk to some obscure precinct detective in the depths of Brooklyn—and in particular why do it in a hospital corridor? Why all this counterspy hugger-mugger?

What finally decided Levine to take the next step was that he couldn't think of any rational alternative explanation for Bobby's

actions. If someone had decided to murder Levine, of course, this would be an excellent ploy to put him in a position where it could be done. But Levine could think of no one at the moment who would have a motive. He wasn't due to be a witness in any upcoming trials, he hadn't made any potentially dangerous arrests recently, nor had he received notification within the last year or so of any felons, arrested by himself, who had been released from prison. Also, if Bobby's story were merely a charade for some sort of con game, how could it hurt Levine? He wouldn't pay anything or sign anything or even necessarily believe anything. And finally, there had been the real brimstone aura of truth in that last direct stare from Bobby when he'd said, "That was my son's name."

So for all those reasons Levine had ultimately stepped off the bus and stood waiting until the Buick pulled to a stop in front of him. But before getting into the car, he did nevertheless check the floor behind the front seat just to be absolutely certain there was no one crouched back there with a pistol or a knife or a length of wire.

There was nothing—just some empty beer cans. So Levine opened the front passenger door and bent to enter the car, but Bobby was leaning over toward him from the steering wheel, saying, "Uh, would you take down the, get rid of the flower?"

"Of course."

Masking tape had been wrapped around both antenna and flower stalk. Levine tugged on the plastic stalk and the tape ripped, releasing it. He then got into the car and shut the door, feeling vaguely foolish to be sitting here with a red flower in his lap. He tossed it atop the dashboard as Bobby accelerated away from the curb, checking both the inside and outside mirrors, saying, "I did shake 'em, but you never know."

"You're being followed?"

"Oh, sure," he said, shrugging as though it was an everyday event. "They wanna know I'm not going anywhere before the big day."

"What big day?"

"Wipeout," Bobby said, and ran a finger along his neck. "Giacomo's got a contract out on me."

"You're sure of that?"

Bobby gave him a quick glance, almost of contempt, then went back to his fitful concentration on the road ahead and both mirrors. "I'm sure of everything," he said. "When I'm not sure, I shut up."

"So you want police protection, is that it?"

"Why don't *I* tell *you* what I want, okay?"

Levine smiled at the rebuff. "Okay," he said.

Bobby turned a corner. He seemed to be driving at random, though trending northwest, away from the hospital and in the general direction of Manhattan, several miles away. "Giacomo's got a young wife," he said. "The old Mama died, all over cancer, right? So Giacomo went to Vegas to work out his grief, he come back with a bride. A dancer at the Aladdin, calls herself Terri. With an I."

"Uh huh."

"My son—"

"Bobby."

"My son. Got hooked on this Terri. He was like a dog, there's a bitch in the neighborhood in heat, you cannot keep that dog in the house."

"Dangerous."

"She says he raped her," Bobby said. "He didn't rape her, she was asking for it."

Levine kept silent. He watched Bobby's fingers twitch and fidget on the steering wheel.

"A bodyguard found them at it," Bobby said. "Naturally she had to cry rape. My son told his story, the bodyguard said forget it, my son went home. Terri with the I, she went to Giacomo. She talked to Giacomo, but Giacomo didn't talk to nobody, not to me, not to my son, not to nobody. The bodyguard got disappeared. My son got disappeared. I said, 'Giacomo, we know one another a long time, why don't you talk to me first, ask me a question?' He still don't talk. I go away, and he puts a contract on me, he puts shadows on me to be sure I'm still here for the hit."

"There's a special time for the—hit?"

"Saturday night. Day after tomorrow. I still got friends to whisper me things. At Barolli's Seafood House in Far Rockaway upstairs in the private dining room there's gonna be a banquet. It's Giacomo's first wedding anniversary." Bobby spoke the words with no apparent irony. "That's where they're gonna take me out. By the time they're at the coffee and cigars, I'm at the bottom of Jamaica Bay."

"Pretty."

"Businesslike," Bobby said.

"If it's police protection you want—"

Levine was stopped by Bobby's cold eyes looking directly at him. "You gonna explain life to me, Mr. Levine?"

"Sorry."

"I know about police protection," Bobby said. He lifted his right

hand from the steering wheel and rubbed his thumb back and forth over the pads of his other fingers. "With this hand," he said, "I have paid protective police to be blind and deaf while the subject of their concern was falling out a window. You are an honest cop, Mr. Levine, and that's very nice, that's why you and me are talking, but let me break you the sad news. There are one or two rotten apples in your crowd."

"I know that."

"I also know about the Feds and their witness protection plan," Bobby said. "They will give me a new name, a new house in a new city, a new job, a new driver's license, a whole entire new life."

"That's right."

"All they take away is my old life," Bobby said. "That's what Giacomo has in mind, too. I *like* my old life."

"So far," Levine said, "I'm not sure why you're telling me all this."

"Because I have a scheme," Bobby said, "but my scheme is taking too long. I won't be able to leave town until the middle of next week. I'm okay until Saturday, but when I don't show at the celebration they'll start looking for me. It'll be tougher for me to move around town."

"I can see that."

"I need a courier," Bobby said. "I need protection and assistance. I need an honest cop to run my errands and see that nobody offs me."

"Tell me your scheme," Levine said.

"I am assembling information," Bobby told him. "I am talking into a tape recorder, I am giving facts and names and dates, I am nailing Giacomo to the cross. And I am getting the physical evidence, too, the contracts and the photos and the letters and the wiretaps and everything else."

"Giacomo shouldn't have killed your son," Levine said.

"Not without talking to me."

"You'll turn over all this information next week?"

"To the law?" Bobby grinned, a kind of distorted grimace that created deep crevices in his cheeks. "You got the wrong idea," he said.

"Then who do you give it all to, all this proof and information?"

"Giacomo's partners," Bobby said. "His friends. His fellow *capi*. His business associates. What I'm putting together is what he's done to *them* over the years. I have stuff Giacomo himself can't remember. I have enough to get him offed ten times from ten different people."

"I see," Levine said. "You ruin Giacomo with the mob, and his contract on you ceases to matter."

"And he's dead. And the Terri with him."

"Why do you think I would help you?" Levine asked.

Again the wrenching grin. "Because I'm gonna give you some scraps from my table," Bobby said. "Just a few things you'd like to know."

"About Giacomo."

"Who else?" Under the wide-brimmed hat, under the darting, dashing, anxious eyes, Bobby smiled like a death's head. "Just enough to put Giacomo in prison," he said. "Where it'll be easier for his friends to kill him."

For forty minutes Levine sat at Lieutenant Barker's desk and looked at pictures, front and side views of Caucasian males, page after page of tough guys in living color, behind clear plastic. The infinite variety of human appearance became confined here to variations on one theme: the Beast, without Beauty.

"Him," Levine said.

Inspector Santangelo leaned over Levine's shoulder and whistled. "You sure?"

"That's him, all right."

It was Bobby, no question. Without the hat, he was shown to have a low broad forehead, thick pepper-and-salt hair that grew spikily across his head, and cold eyes that seemed to slink and lurk behind half lowered lids. Without the hat he looked more like a snake. The name under the photos was Ralph Banadando.

Inspector Santangelo was visibly impressed. Crossing the lieutenant's office to resume his seat on the sofa, he said, "No wonder he knows where the bodies are buried. And no wonder he called Polito by his first name."

Lieutenant Barker, chief of the precinct's detective squad, whose office this was, said, "Who is he?"

"Benny Banadando," the inspector said. "He's Giacomo Polito's right-hand man—they came up through the ranks together. He's the number-two man in that mob." Grinning at Levine, he said, "That's no soldier. He told you he was a soldier? That's a General." Nodding at Barker, seated in what was usually the visitor's chair, he said, "You did right to call me, Fred."

"Thanks."

It was Friday morning, nearly noon. Yesterday, saying he would

get in touch with Levine sometime today to hear his answer, whether or not he would accept the proposition, Bobby—Ralph “Benny” Banadando now—had let Levine off six blocks from his home, giving Levine ten minutes to walk and think. At home, he had at once phoned the precinct to give Lieutenant Barker a brief recap of the conversation. Given the truth of Bobby’s remark about the “one or two rotten apples” in the Police Department, they’d agreed not to spread the story very widely, and Barker had phoned his old friend Inspector Santangelo, now assigned to the Organized Crime Unit. This morning Santangelo had come down to the Forty-third Precinct with his book of mug shots, and now Levine had a name for Bobby. He said, “Does Banadando have a son?”

“He did,” Santangelo said in a dry tone. “Fellow named Robert, not very sweet. What do you want to do, Abe? Can I call you Abe?”

“Sure.”

“And I’m Mike,” Santangelo said. “You want to turn this thing over to me, or do you want to follow through yourself?”

“You mean, do I want to tell Banadando yes or no.”

“That’s what I mean.” Grinning at some private thought, Santangelo sat back on the sofa, stretching his long legs in the small office. “Before you answer,” he said, “let me say this. I don’t want to bring this news back to my shop, because if I do it’ll get to Polito and he won’t wait for the symbolic moment of his anniversary dinner.”

Levine nodded. “That’s what we thought, too.”

“In addition,” Santangelo said, “you’ll be marked yourself, Abe, because Polito won’t be sure how much Banadando told you.”

Lieutenant Barker said, “He won’t try to kill a cop.”

“Probably not,” Santangelo said. “But if he’s nervous enough, it’s a possibility. From our point of view, it’s better if Banadando can work his scheme in peace and quiet. But what that means, Abe, we can’t provide backup.”

“I can,” Lieutenant Barker said. “Abe’s partner, Jack Crawley, can back him up.”

“That’s not quite the same as three busloads of TPF,” Santangelo said. “You see what I’m getting at, Abe? This could be dangerous for you.”

Levine said, “What happens if I tell Banadando no?”

“I pull him in,” Santangelo said. “I try to convince him his scheme is busted anyway and he might as well cooperate with us.”

“He’ll say no.”

Santangelo shrugged. "It's worth a try."  
Levine said, "You won't have to. I'll tell him yes."

"Good," said Banadando's husky, low, insinuating voice on the phone. It was twenty to five on Friday afternoon and Levine was in the hospital again, visiting with Andy Stettin. Andy's phone had rung and it was Banadando, for Levine.

Conscious of Andy's curious eyes on him, Levine said into the phone, "What happens now?"

"Nothing. I can still play my own hand till tomorrow night. You know Long Island well?"

"Pretty well."

"About fifty miles out there's a town called Bay Shore. On the Great South Bay."

"I know it."

"Go there Sunday morning, around nine. Go down to the end of Maple, park there."

"What will I—?" But Banadando had hung up.

Levine replaced the receiver and Andy said, "What was that? Sounded like a real sweetheart."

"Mobster," Levine said. "He's gonna give some evidence. For some reason he made me the intermediary."

"Why's he giving evidence?"

Levine was reluctant to hold back—it wasn't as though he mistrusted *Andy*—but he had to maintain a habit of reticence in this situation. "Some of his pals have a contract on him," he said.

Andy's lip curled. "Let 'em kill each other off. Best thing that can happen."

"I suppose so," said Levine slowly, but the words were ashes in his mouth. He understood why what Andy had just said was the common, almost the universal belief among the police; whenever one mobster killed another, great smiles of happiness lit up the faces in the precinct houses. But Levine just couldn't take pleasure from the death of a human being, no matter who, no matter what he had done in his life. He supposed it was really selfishness, really only a matter of projecting their deaths onto himself, visualizing his own end in theirs, that made him troubled and sad at the cutting short of lives so stained and spoiled, but nevertheless he just couldn't bring himself to share in the general glee at the thought of a murdered mobster.

A little later, as he was leaving Andy's room, he paused in the

doorway to let a wizened ancient man pass by, moving slowly and awkwardly and painfully with the help of a walker. *That's me*, Levine thought, and behind him Andy said, "If they start bumping one another off, Abe, just step to one side."

Levine looked back at him, bewildered, his mind for an instant filling with visions of doddering oldsters bumping one another off: "What do you mean?"

"Your mobster pals. They love to kill so much, let 'em kill each other. It isn't up to us to stop it, or to get in the way."

"I'll stay out of the way," Levine promised. Then he smiled and waved and left, walking around the ancient man, who had barely progressed beyond the doorway.

Maple Avenue in Bay Shore ended on a long wide dock, covered with asphalt and its center lined with parking meters. Levine found a free meter, got out of the car, and strolled a bit, smelling the salt tang. Once or twice he glanced back the way he had come, without seeing Jack Crawley; which was as it should be.

Out near the end of the dock, several small boats were offloading bushel baskets and burlap bags, all filled with clams. Two trucks were receiving the harvest, and the men working there called cheerfully at one another, talking more loudly than necessary, but apparently filled with high spirits because of the clarity and beauty of the day.

Nine A.M. on the third Sunday in October. The air was clear, the sun bright in a sky dotted with clouds, the water frisky and glinting and cold-looking. Levine inhaled deeply, glad to be alive, barely even conscious of the straps around his shoulders and chest, under his shirt, holding the recording apparatus.

He strolled aimlessly on the dock for about fifteen minutes and then turned at the sound of a *beep-beep* to see a small inboard motorboat bobbing next to the dock, with Banadando at the wheel. Banadando gestured, and Levine crossed over to stand looking down at him. "Come aboard," Banadando said. "We'll go for a run on the bay."

Clammers and fishermen were in other small boats dotting the bay. Long Island was five miles or so to the north, the barrier beach called Fire Island was just to the south, and Banadando's boat—*Bobby's Dream* was the name painted on the stern in flowing golden letters—was simply another anonymous speck on the dancing water.

*Bobby's Dream* was compact but comfortable, its cabin where Levine now sat containing a tiny galley-style kitchen, cunning storage spaces, a foldaway table, and a pair of long upholstered benches that converted to twin beds. "Nice, huh?" Banadando said, coming down into the cabin after cutting the engine and dropping anchor.

"Very clever," Levine said.

"That, too," Banadando agreed. Today he wore a long-billed white yachting cap edged in gold, the bill shielding his eyes as yesterday's hat had done. In blue blazer, white scarf, and white pants, he was almost a parody of the weekend yachtsman. Sitting on the bench across from Levine, he said, "After dark I take the inlet, I go out to the ocean, I sleep in comfort and safety. Nobody knows where I am or where I'll be next. I land where I want, when I want. Until I leave town, this is the safest place in the world for me."

"I can see that," Levine said.

"You wired?"

"Of course," Levine said.

Banadando shook his head, smirking a bit. "We all go through the motions, right? You know I know you're gonna be wired, so I know you know I won't say anything you can use. But still you got to go through the whole thing, strap it on, walk around like a telephone-company employee. You broadcasting or taping?"

"Taping," Levine said, wondering if Banadando would insist on being given the tape.

But Banadando merely smiled, saying, "Good. If you were broadcasting, we'd be too far out for your backup to read."

"That's right. Mr. Banadando, we—"

Banadando made a face. "I figured you'd find that out, who I am, but I don't like it. How many cops know about our little conversation?"

"Four, including me. We're already aware of the existence of rotten apples. Don't worry, we won't alert Polito through the department."

"Don't tell me not to worry, Mr. Levine."

"Sorry."

"You're a long time dead."

"I agree," Levine said.

Banadando took from an outside pocket of his blazer a sheet of white typewriter paper folded into quarters. Opening this, smoothing it on the tabletop, he turned it so the handwriting faced Levine. It was large block-printed letters in black ink. He said, "You see all this?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not giving you this paper, you're remembering it. Or you'll listen to your tape, later. You see what I mean?"

Levine looked at him. "Why do you think I'm going to be in that much trouble, Mr. Banadando?"

"Because I don't know how smart you are," Banadando said. "Maybe you're very dumb. Maybe one of the three cops you talked to is right now on the phone to Giacomo. Maybe you get nervous in the clutch. Maybe all kinds of things. I can't see the future, Mr. Levine, so I protect myself from it just as hard as I can. Okay?"

"Okay," Levine said.

Banadando's fingertip touched the first word on the sheet of paper. His hands were thick and stubby-fingered, but very clean, with meticulously groomed nails. The effect, however, was not of cleanliness but of a kind of doughy unhealthfulness. "This," Banadando said, his sausage finger tapping the word, "is a telephone number."

Levine frowned. The word, all alone near the top of the sheet, was VANDYKE. "It is?"

"The phone dial doesn't just have numbers," Banadando reminded him. "It has letters. Dial those letters. You'll call just after noon today—this is back in the city, it's a city number."

"All right."

"You got to call no later than ten past twelve or he won't be there."

"All right."

"When the guy answers, you tell him you're Abe. That's all he knows about you, that's all he needs to know. He'll tell you does he have the stuff yet or not. If it's no, he'll tell you when to call again."

"What is this stuff?"

"Let it be a surprise," Banadando said.

Levine took a breath. "Mr. Banadando," he said, "I have to tell you something you should already know. If any evidence of crime is put in my possession, I'm going to turn it over to my superiors."

"Sure you are," Banadando said. "You'll take the package, you'll sniff all over it like a bird-dog, you'll get nothing out of it. The next thing that happens, you'll bring it to me."

"But you realize we'll study it first."

"I am not here to be stupid," Banadando said. His finger moved down to the next item, below VANDYKE. There was the word KOPYKAT, and under it an address: 1411 BROADWAY. "This is a copying service," he said. "It's a chain, there's Kopykats all over the city. This is the Broadway one. You got it?"

"Yes."

"They're open on Sunday. This afternoon, any time this afternoon, you go there and pick up the package for Mr. Robert. If there's no package, don't worry about it."

"All right."

The stubby finger moved down to the last item on the sheet of paper: BELLPORT on one line, and under it HOWELL'S POINT. "Tomorrow morning," he said. "It's farther out from the city, so let's say ten o'clock. You bring me the Kopykat package and the other package, and I tell you what next."

"And the scraps from your table?"

With a thin smile, Banadando shook his head. "We pay at the end," he said.

"No," Levine said. "We have to have something now, to prove it's worthwhile."

Banadando sat back, brooding. The small movements of the boat were comforting at first, but then insistent.

A large white ferry went by, on its way to Fire Island, and its wake made the *Bobby's Dream* heave on the water like something alive and in pain.

"Upstate in Attica," Banadando said at last, "in the state pen there, you got a guy named Johnson, serving five consecutive life terms. He's never coming out. He'll be the only Johnson there with that sentence."

Levine smiled faintly. "I guess you're right."

"In Vermont," Banadando said, speaking slowly, picking his words with obvious care, "there used to be a ski lodge called TransAlpine, had a big Olympic indoor skating rink. Burned down. No link between that and Johnson at all, right?"

"You tell me," Levine said.

"Johnson did things for Giacomo sometimes," Banadando said. "Giacomo had a piece of TransAlpine. Not right out in front, but you could find it."

"And?"

"Johnson hired the torch."

"It was arson?"

"Nobody ever said it was," Banadando said. "Not up there in Vermont. All I say to you is, Johnson hired the torch. Johnson and TransAlpine, there's no link there, so nobody ever talked to Johnson about that. Now all of a sudden I'm giving you a link. And what has Johnson got to lose?"

"The same as the rest of us," Levine said . . .

The man who answered the Vandyke phone number had a thin raspy voice. He said, "I got everything but the gun. You want?"

"Yes," Levine said.

"In Manhattan," the raspy voice said, "Seventy-ninth Street and Broadway, there's benches at the median, middle of the street, where people sit in the sun. Around two o'clock there'll be an old guy there with the package, gift-wrapped. Tell him you're Abe."

Levine followed directions and found half a dozen elderly men on the stone bench there, faces turned to the thin clear autumn sun. The faces were absorbing the gold, hoarding it, stocking it up for the long cold time in the dark to come.

One of the old men held in his lap a parcel that looked like a box of candy gaily wrapped in Happy Birthday paper. Levine went to him, identified himself as Abe, and took delivery. When Levine asked him how he'd come by the package, the old man said, "Fella give it to me half an hour ago with a five-dollar bill. Said you'd be along, said he couldn't wait, said I had an honest face."

The next old man over laughed, showing a mouth without teeth. "I said to the fella," he announced, "what kinda face you think I got? Paid me no never mind."

Carrying the Happy Birthday parcel, Levine went down Broadway to Kopykat, where he picked up the package for Mr. Robert. Then he continued on downtown to hand the material over to Inspector Santangelo at the Organized Crime Unit. "People upstate are talking to Johnson," Santangelo said.

"But is he talking to them?"

Santangelo grinned. "He will."

The next morning, Santangelo brought the two packages to the Forty-third Precinct and handed them back to Levine in Lieutenant Barker's office. The Kopykat package had turned out to be copies of about forty ledger pages, but only numbers and abbreviations were filled in, making it useless by itself; you'd have to know what business those pages were connected to, and presumably Banando's intended customer would know.

As for the birthday present, that box had contained a jumble of sales slips, for items ranging from automobiles and furs to coffee tables and refrigerators, plus a bunch of photos and negatives. There were a dozen pictures of what appeared to be the same orgy, pictures of a man getting into a car on a city street, pictures of a man at a

construction site, of a truck being loaded or unloaded at the same site, of two men exchanging an envelope in the doorway of an appliance store.

Everything had been fingerprinted and photographed and brooded over, but there wasn't so far much value in the material. "It's puzzle parts," Santangelo said. "Just a couple of stray puzzle parts. Banadando has the rest."

Monday was a less pretty day than Sunday had been, the broad sky piling up with tumbled dirty clouds and a damp breeze blowing from the northeast. With Banadando's packages on the front seat beside him, Levine drove out the Long Island Expressway and took the turnoff south for Bellport. He found Howell's Point, left the car, and saw Banadando approaching on a bicycle, dressed in his yachting outfit, with a supermarket bag in the basket. Banadando looked unexpectedly human and vulnerable, not at all like the tough guy he really was. Levine was pleased with the man, almost proud of him, for how matter-of-factly he carried it off.

Dismounting, Banadando said, "Take the groceries, okay? The boat's just over here."

Banadando walked the bike and Levine followed with the bag and the two packages. The bag contained milk, tomatoes, lettuce, English muffins, a steak. Levine found himself wondering: Does Banadando have a wife? Is she part of his escape plan, or is he abandoning her, or does she not exist? Maybe she's already gone on ahead to prepare their next home. Banadando's style was that of the complete loner, but on the other hand he was only involved in this problem because of his emotional attachment to his son.

That was why Levine had never been able to go along with the idea that a murdered mobster was something to be happy about. Even the worst of human beings was still in some way a human being, was more than and other than a simple cartoon criminal. No death should be gloated over.

Aboard the boat, Banadando lashed the bike to the foredeck, then cast them off and headed out onto the bay, while Levine went below and put away the groceries. Coming up again on deck, where Banadando sat in a tall canvas chair at the wheel, steering them on a long gradual curve eastward into Bellport Bay, Levine said, "I'm not wired today. Thought you'd like to know."

Banadando grinned at him. "Waste of good tape, huh?"

"You won't say anything useful while I'm recording you."

"I won't say anything useful at all. Not the way you mean."

They ran southeast for fifteen minutes, then Banadando dropped anchor near Ridge Island and they went below together to talk. Levine explained that the Vandyke man had said he had everything but the gun, and Banadando waved that away: "I don't need the gun. I got enough without the gun."

"Well, here it all is," Levine said, gesturing to the two packages on the table.

Banadando nodded at the packages and grinned. "Made no sense to you, huh?"

"That's right."

"It'll make sense to some people," Banadando said. "And that's all it has to do. What about Johnson?"

"He's being talked to."

"He'll be very interesting, Johnson. Okay, time to memorize."

It was another sheet of paper, instructions on another two pickups. Levine listened and nodded, and when Banadando was done he said, "How long am I your messenger?"

"Two more days," Banadando said. "Tomorrow morning you bring me this stuff, I give you the last shopping list. Wednesday morning you bring me the last of it, I give you a nice package for yourself. The Johnson stuff is just a teaser—Wednesday morning I give you a banquet."

"And you leave."

"That's right," Banadando said. "And if you keep your ear to the ground the next few months, Detective Levine, you will hear some faraway explosions."

Their business done, they both went up on deck, and Levine sat in the second canvas chair while Banadando steered back toward Bellport. Even though the sky was lowering with clouds and there was a chill dampness in the air, there was something extraordinarily pleasant about being out here in this boat, skimming the choppy little wavelets, far from the cares of the world.

Not far enough. They were almost to Howell's Point. Levine could actually see his own car and a few other cars and some people walking along the pier when Banadando suddenly swore and spun the wheel and the *Bobby's Dream* veered around in a tight half circle, lying way over on its side into the turn, spewing foam in a great white welt on the gray water.

It wasn't till they were far from shore, out in the empty middle

of the bay, that Banadando slowed the boat again and Levine could talk to him, saying, "Friends of yours back there?"

"Friends of *his*," Banadando said, his voice vibrating like a guitar string.

Tension had bunched the muscles in his cheeks and around his mouth, and his lips were thin and bloodless.

Levine said, "I wasn't followed, I can tell you that. My back-up would have known."

"The supermarket," Banadando said. "I can't even go to the supermarket. This is *rotten* luck, *rotten* luck."

"Now he knows about the boat."

"He can put people all around this bay, Giacomo can," Banadando said. "If he knows there's a reason. And now he knows there's a reason."

"I'll just mention police protection once," Levine said.

Banadando nodded. "Good," he said. "That was the mention. Look here."

From an enclosed cabinet under the wheel, Banadando pulled out a Defense Mapping Agency book of Sailing Directions, found the pages he wanted, and showed Levine what he intended to do.

"Long Island's a hundred twenty miles long," he said. "From where we are here, there's like another seventy miles out to the end. But I can't stay on the South Shore any more, so here's what I'm gonna do. I don't have to go all the way out to Montauk Point at the end of the island. Here by Hampton Bays I can take the Shinnecock Canal through to Peconic Bay, then I only have to go out around Orient Point and there I am on the North Shore. Then I head west again, across Long Island Sound. Look here on this map, west of Mattituck Inlet, you see this little dip in the coastline?"

"Yes."

"There's a dirt road there, comes down from Bergen Avenue. I know that place from years ago. There's a little wooden dock there, that's all. Nobody around. That's where we meet tomorrow, let Giacomo and his boys search the South Shore all they want."

Looking at the maps, Levine said, "That's a long way to go in a small boat like this."

"A hundred miles," Banadando said, dismissing it. "Maybe less. Don't worry, Levine, I'll be there. Between now and Wednesday, let's face it, the only way I stay alive is to do things Giacomo thinks I won't do or can't do."

"You're right," Levine said.

"I'm always right," Banadando said. "I can't take you back to your car. I'll drop you at Center Moriches, you can take a cab back . . ."

Levine made that day's pickups with no trouble, and that evening, as rain tapped hesitantly at the windows, the four policemen who knew about Banadando—being Levine and Jack Crawley and Lieutenant Barker and Inspector Santangelo—met in the lieutenant's office at the precinct to decide what to do next.

Jack Crawley, a big beefy man with heavy shoulders and hands and a generally dissatisfied look, had no doubt what *he* wanted to do next: "Bring in everybody," he said. "Inspector, you bring in your whole Organized Crime Unit, we bring in plainclothes *and* uniformed people from the precinct, and we surround that mother. I don't want Abe to spend any more time in the middle of some other clown's argument."

"I'm already in, Jack," Levine said. "We're on the verge of getting some very useful information. I think Banadando actually is as smart as he thinks he is, and that he'll manage to elude Polito for the next two days. It's only until Wednesday, after all. The minute I step off that boat on Wednesday you can phone Inspector Santangelo at Organized Crime, tell him I'm out of the way, and send in the entire police department if you want."

"He'll be long gone by then," Crawley said, and Lieutenant Barker said, "I tend to agree with Jack."

"I'm sorry," said Levine, "but I don't. In the first place, he *won't* be long gone. I believe he actually will make it around the island tonight, but it won't be an easy trip. Those little boats always *feel* like they're going fast, but they're not. What's the top speed of a boat like that on choppy open water? Twenty miles an hour, maybe a little more? And they gobble up gasoline, he'll have to stop once or twice at marinas. This rain will slow him down. Traveling as fast as he can, on a small boat pounding up and down over every wave, he'll be lucky if it only takes him seven or eight hours to get around to where he's supposed to meet me tomorrow."

Lieutenant Barker said, "Meaning what, Abe? How does that connect?"

"Meaning," Levine said, "he can't disappear from us all that easily."

Santangelo said, "That's not such good news, Abe. If *we* could find Banadando just like that, why can't Polito?"

Levine shrugged. "Maybe he can, I hope not. But we have the entire law enforcement apparatus behind us to help, and Polito

doesn't. We can bring in the Coast Guard, Army helicopters, anything we need."

Smiling, Santangelo said, "Not necessarily at the snap of our fingers."

"No, but it can be done. Polito can't begin to match our manpower or our authority."

Crawley said, "Never mind all of that after-the-event stuff, Abe. What it comes down to is, Polito's people got to that pier today within an hour of *you* getting there. What if they'd been an hour earlier?"

"A lot of different things could have happened," Levine said.

"Some of them nasty," Crawley told him.

Santangelo said, "The decision has been Abe's from the beginning, and it still is. Abe, I'll go along with whatever you decide. But I have to say, there's a lot in what your partner says."

"I'll stay the course," Levine told him.

Santangelo said, "There's something else to consider. If something goes wrong, if Banadando gets killed or slips through our fingers, we could all be in trouble for not reporting the situation right away."

Levine spread his hands. "If you're worried about that, you rank me, you could take the decision out of my hands."

"No, I don't want to," Santangelo said. "I think we're handling it right, but I want you and Fred and Officer Crawley to know there could be trouble for all of us down the line. Within the Department."

Lieutenant Barker said, "Let's count that out of the decision-making."

"Fine with me," Santangelo said.

The Long Island Expressway ended just short of Riverhead, seventy-five miles from Manhattan but still another forty-five miles from the end of the island at Montauk Point. The last dozen miles the traffic had thinned out so much that on the long straightaways Levine could see in the rearview mirror Jack Crawley's car, lagging way back. The rain had stopped sometime during the night but the sky was still cloud-covered and the air was cooler and still damp. In midmorning, the sparse traffic here at the eastern end of the Expressway was mostly delivery vans and a few private cars containing shoppers, the latter mainly headed west toward the population centers.

The land out here seemed to imitate the wave-formations of the surrounding sea—long gradual rolls of scrub over which the highway moved in easy gradients, long sweeps steadily upward followed by

long gradual declines. It was on the upslopes that Levine would catch glimpses of Jack Crawley's dark-green Pontiac far behind and on the downslopes that he was increasingly alone.

At the Nugent Drive exit, two miles before the end of the highway, a car was entering the road, a black Chevrolet. Levine pulled accommodatingly into the left lane, passed the car, saw it recede in his mirror, and a moment later was over the next rise. Signs announced the end of the road.

The Chevy reappeared over the crest behind him so abruptly, moving so fast, that Levine hardly had time to register its presence in his mirror before it was shooting past him on the right and there were flat cracking sounds like someone breaking tree branches and the wheel wrenched itself out of Levine's hands.

He'd been doing just over sixty. The Chevy was already far away in front and Levine's car was slewing around toward the right shoulder, the wheel still spinning rightward. Levine grabbed it, fighting to pull it back to the left, his right foot tapping and tapping the brakes. Blowout, he thought, but at the same time his mind was overriding that normal thought, was telling him, no, they shot it out, they shot the tire!

Banadando! They found him, they're going after him—they cut me out of the play!

He was recapturing control of his emotions and his thoughts and the car when its right tires hit the gravel and dirt beside the road and tried to yank the steering wheel out of his hands again. He hung on, his foot tapping and tapping, pressing down harder as they slowed, daring to assert more and more control until at last, in a swirl of tan dust of its own creation, the car jolted to a stop and skewed slightly at an angle toward the highway, seeming to sag in exhaustion on its springs.

Levine opened his mouth wide to breathe, but the constriction was farther back, deep in his throat. He leaned forward, resting his forehead on the top of the steering wheel, feeling its bottom press hard into his stomach. His trembling hand went up to cup his left ear, the position in which, he had learned, he could best hear his heart.

Beat, beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat, beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat, beat, beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat, beat . . .

All right. Straightening, Levine took a deep breath, finding his throat more open, the act of breathing less painful. That had been a scary one.

Generally, the skips came every eighth beat, but excitement or exercise or terror could shorten the spaces. Three was about the closest it had ever come, and this near-accident had matched that record.

Accident? This was no accident. His entire body still slightly trembling, Levine struggled out of the car, walked around it, and saw that both right-side tires were flat. They showed garish big ragged entry holes in their sides. A sharpshooter, worth the money Polito would be paying him.

Polito. Banadando. Feeling sudden urgency, Levine looked up the empty roadway toward the top of the slope he'd just come down. Crawley should have appeared by now, he wasn't that far back.

They've taken him out, too.

Jesus, what's happened to Crawley? Levine had actually trotted a few paces toward that distant crest when over it came a rattly white delivery van and he remembered his other urgency instead: Banadando. In going for Levine's tires, Polito's men had made it clear they weren't interested in killing police today, so they'd undoubtedly taken out Jack Crawley the same way. The man in real trouble was Banadando.

Pulling his shield out of his jacket pocket, waving it in the air, Levine flagged the approaching van to a halt. A big boxy contraption advertising a brand of potato chips on its side, it was driven by a skinny bearded man who stood up to drive. He was frowning at Levine with a kind of hopeful curiosity, as though here might be that which would rescue him from terminal boredom.

It was. The tall door on the right side of the van was hooked open. Climbing up into the tall vehicle, still showing the shield, Levine said, "Police. I'm commandeering this truck."

"*This* truck?" The young man grinned, shaking his head. "You got to be kidding."

"Drive," Levine told him. "As fast as this thing will go." To encourage the young man, he added, "We're trying to stop a murder."

"You're on, pal!"

But no matter how enthusiastic the young man might be, the van's top speed turned out to be just about fifty-two. Levine kept

leaning his head out the open doorway, looking back, hoping to see Jack Crawley after all, but it never happened.

The interior of the van was piled high with outsize cardboard cartons, presumably containing potato chips. Levine leaned against the flat top of the dashboard under the high windshield and wrote a note on a sheet of paper torn from his memo pad:

"NYPD Detective Abraham Levine, 43 Precinct. Partner Jack Crawley in apparent accident on LIE. Underworld informant under attack. Follow caller to site."

After the highway ended, the young man followed Levine's instructions along Old Country Road and Main Road and Church Lane and Second Avenue. "It'll be a dirt road," Levine said. "On your left."

When they finally found it, the young man was going to swing to the left and drive down the road but Levine stopped him. Handing over the note, he said, "Go to the nearest phone, call the Suffolk County police, read this to them, tell them where I am."

"You might want me along," the young man said. "Maybe you could use some help."

"Bring me help," Levine told him. Stepping down to the shoulder of the road, he slapped the tinny side of the van as though it were a horse, calling to the driver, "Go on, now. Hurry!"

"Right!"

The van lumbered away, motor roaring as the young man tried to accelerate too rapidly up through the gears, and Levine trotted across the road and started down the dirt road, seeing the fresh scars and streaks of a car having recently passed this way.

First he saw the water through the thin-leaved birch trees—Long Island Sound, separating this long tongue of land from Connecticut. Then he saw the automobile, a small fast low-to-the-ground Mercedes-Benz sports car painted dark-blue. The black Chevy was nowhere in sight. Polito apparently employed specialists.

There was only the one car, and it contained seating for only two. Levine unlimbered his .38 S&W Police Special from its holster on his right hip and moved forward, stepping cautiously on the weedy leaf-covered ground. Yellow and orange leaves fluttered down, sometimes singly or, when the breeze lifted, they dropped in platoons, infiltrating their way to the ground.

Beyond the Mercedes, muddy ground sloped down to an old wooden dock. Tied beside it, very close to shore, was the *Bobby's Dream*. Revolver in hand, his eyes on the boat, Levine approached and, as

he passed the Mercedes, a big-shouldered man in dark topcoat and hat came up out of the boat onto the dock, his arms full of boxes and packages, a couple of which Levine recognized—things he had brought to Banadando himself. He stopped, arm out, revolver aimed, and quietly said, "Just keep coming this way."

The man stopped, staring at Levine, his expression one of total amazement. Then, in a blindingly swift move, he flung the boxes away and his right hand stabbed within his topcoat.

Levine didn't want to kill, but he did want to stop the man. He fired, aiming high on the man's torso on the right side, wanting to knock him down, knock him out of play, but still leave the breath of life in him. But the man was ducking, bobbing, just as Levine fired. When he jolted back, his pistol flying out of his clothes and arcing away to fall into the water, Levine had no idea where he'd been hit. He went down hard, the sound a solid thud on the wooden boards of the dock, and he didn't move.

A sudden burst of pistol fire flared from the boat and Levine flung himself backward, putting the low bulk of the Mercedes between himself and the gunman. The firing stopped, and Levine sat on the leafy ground, revolver in his right hand, left hand pressed to his chest, mouth stretched wide. The constriction . . .

Hand cupped to ear, he counted beats, and after the fourth came the skip. Not too bad, not so bad as a little while ago in the car.

To his right, where he was sitting, were the hood and bumper and left front tire of the Mercedes, and out at an angle beyond them were the dock and the boat and the unmoving man Levine had shot. To his left, pressing against his arm, was the narrow graceful trunk of a birch tree. Levine sagged briefly against the tree, then pulled himself up onto his knees and looked cautiously over the hood.

Immediately the pistol cracked over there, and a fluttering of branches took place somewhere behind Levine, who ducked back down. When nothing else happened, he called, "Banadando!"

"He don't feel like talking!" yelled a voice.

"Send him out here!"

"He don't feel like walking either!"

So he was dead already, which would give the man on the boat nothing to lose by holding out. Still, Levine called, "Come out of there with your hands up!"

"I'll tell him when he comes in!"

"You won't get away!"

"Yeah? Where's your army?"

"On its way!" Levine called, but the constriction closed his throat again, chopping off the last word. Get here soon, he prayed.

The man on the boat swore loudly and fired twice in Levine's direction. Headlight glass shattered and Levine couldn't help flinching away, his entire body clenching at each shot. "I'm comin' right through you!" yelled the voice.

"Come right ahead!" Levine yelled back. But he didn't yell it, he hoarsely coughed it. The tightness in his throat was making his head ache, was putting metal bands around his head just above his eyes. He *couldn't* pass out, he *had* to hold this fellow here. Bracing himself between the Mercedes and the tree trunk, he extended his arm forward onto the hood, where the revolver would be visible to the man in the boat. Hold him there. Hold him, no matter what.

Another shot pinged off the car's body—merely frustration and rage, but it made Levine wince. His free hand went to his ear. He sat looking at a leaf that had fallen into his lap.

Beat, beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat, beat—

Skip.

Beat—

The Suffolk County cops were all over the dock, the boat, the foreshore. Boxes of Banadando's evidence were being carried to the cars. The gunman from the boat had already been taken away in handcuffs, and now they were waiting for the ambulance and the hearse.

Crawley stood with the Medical Examiner, who straightened and said, "He was dead at least a quarter hour when you got here."

"Yeah, I thought. And this one?"

They left Abe Levine's body and walked over to the wounded man on the dock, still unconscious but wrapped now in blankets from the police cars. "He'll live," the M.E. said.

"The wrong ones die," Crawley said.

"Everybody dies," The M.E. said.

Crawley turned and looked back at his partner. Abe was braced between the car and the tree, arm out straight, revolver just visible to the boat. He had died that way, his heart stopping forever but his body not moving. Sirens sounded, approaching.

"How do you like that," Crawley said. "He was dead, and he finished the job anyway. His corpse held that punk covered until we could get here."

"Maybe they'll give him a medal," the M.E. said, and grinned, showing uneven teeth. "A posthumous medal. The first legit posthumous medal ever, for performance above and beyond the call of death."

The hearse and ambulance were arriving. Crawley looked at the M.E. and pointed at Abe. "No plastic body bag," he said. "He gets a blanket."



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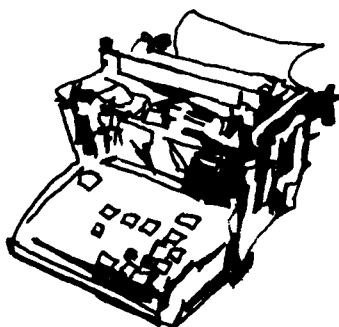
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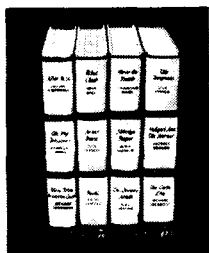
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